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30 Masterpieces of the Ancient World

Course Guidebook

Professor Diana K. McDonald
Boston College Fine Arts Department



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Professor Diana Krumholz McDonald is an art historian and lecturer specializing in ancient art. Since 1997, she has been on the faculty of Boston College, where she teaches the Art of Ancient America and Ancient Mediterranean Art. She received her B.A. in Fine Arts from

Harvard University and her Ph.D. from Columbia University, where she concentrated in Ancient Near Eastern and Pre-Columbian Art.

Professor McDonald frequently lectures at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where her courses have included the Art of Egypt and Nubia, Art of the Ancient Near East, and Art of the Ancient Americas. Most recently, Professor McDonald advised on, and lectured at, the symposium for the Museum of Fine Art's 2011–2012 exhibition *Aphrodite and the Gods of Love*. She wrote the first chapter in the show's catalogue, entitled "Aphrodite's Ancestors: Ancient Near Eastern Goddesses of Love."

Professor McDonald's primary interest is in animal iconography in ancient art and in aspects of evolution that help explain the origin of art and symbolism in art. She wrote her dissertation on serpent imagery in the ancient Near East. More recently, she has been focusing on lion symbolism, the goddess Ishtar, and the history of the horse.

Professor McDonald published nine essays in the book *The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The Lost Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia*; has written scholarly articles and reviews; and frequently lectures on the art of Mesopotamia and other regions for clubs and in other venues, such as the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University.

Previously, Professor McDonald taught the Humanities art history course at Columbia University; worked at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in

the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art and the Office of Film and Television; worked at the Indonesian National Museum in Jakarta; and lectured at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, Poland, where she lived for two years. She was also a curator at the Arthur M. Sackler Collections in New York, where she helped to mount exhibitions on ancient Iranian ceramics and pre-Columbian ceramics across the United States and in Scotland. Professor McDonald has led groups on art tours, including a tour focusing on the art and culture of Brazil for the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

Professor McDonald was a Henry Luce Scholar in Indonesia and a Presidential Scholar at Columbia University. She also received both a Fulbright Scholarship and a Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst Scholarship, which she declined in order to go to Asia. She is on the Visiting Committee of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in the Art of the Ancient World department; the Collections Committee of the Harvard Art Museums; and the Advisory Council of Zoo New England. She has visited the museums and archaeological sites of more than 40 countries.■

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30 Masterpieces of the Ancient World

Scope:

This course will take you around the world to look at and examine in depth some of the greatest masterpieces of ancient art. We will explore spectacular artworks from diverse places and times, starting with cave paintings that were made at the dawn of human creativity in the Paleolithic Age to the contents of tombs and buildings, remarkable stone sculptures, and wrought gold and textiles that were made as recently as 600 years ago. Each of the selected masterpieces is the creation of a time and culture that make it unique, and each is among the finest examples of art from its culture.

Throughout the course, we will learn a great deal about the cultural contexts of the artworks we will explore and what makes each piece important, outstanding, and beautiful. We will see how individual pieces fit into the flow of world art and what each has in common with the others. We'll learn how each object functioned in its culture, about its technology, and what sort of message it imparted to the people of its time and place.

Whether made of marble, terra-cotta, gold, or alpaca wool, each masterpiece had a cultural role and combined both the skills and the intellect of some of the greatest artists of all time. We'll learn which themes and purposes preoccupied the various cultures and which materials expressed their creativity and concerns the best. Each masterpiece has a story to tell; these artworks are complex, engaging, and stunning expressions of their cultures.

The masterpieces range broadly in place and time, and their selection is, to a great extent, based on what survived natural, climatic, and human destruction. Therefore, we will see many artworks that stem from cultures emphasizing stone and ceramics, such as the Greeks

and the Maya, and fewer from tropical cultures in, for instance, sub-Saharan Africa, where the vicissitudes of tropical weather left us little.

We will see fabulous objects, such as the gold earspools of a Moche lord and the gold mask of King Tutankhamun, that were found only in the last century or so in tombs. Even the cave art of Chauvet was only recently discovered.

Other tombs we'll look at preserved rare and unusual artworks. These include the remarkably complex, colorful, and beautiful weavings of the Andean cultures, ranging from the mummy wrappings of the Paracas Peninsula to the tunic of an Inca emperor.

The objects in this course were chosen for their beauty and diversity and for how they fit together to demonstrate the concerns of ancient cultures and artists. There is no definitive list of masterpieces of the ancient world, but each one presented here has been deemed a masterpiece by other experts in the field.

We will learn about the different subjects and themes of ancient art, starting with the importance of animals as subjects, whether they appear in cave art or as images and symbols of gods, such as those found in the Royal Tombs at Ur in Mesopotamia.

We'll see how the human body was treated in sculpture over thousands of years and explain, for instance, the reasons behind the innovations that the Greeks made in representing humans realistically or in motion and why other cultures preferred other modes of human representation.

We'll learn how death and the drive for immortality initiated much of the creation of art, such as the Egyptians' fantastic tomb and temple sculpture. We'll see that the need to legitimate a ruler or impart propaganda concerning the role of the state or ruler were at the root of many other creations, such as the Assyrian reliefs.

Religious impulses and the drive for survival and fertility show up as major themes, particularly in the most ancient art, such as objects

from Mesopotamia. Sometimes, gods, goddesses, and depictions of the cosmos and religious beliefs are the main function of a monument or artwork, as we will see in the Buddhist stupa at Borobudur in Java. Shamanism and transformative experiences also show their faces in art, as in the carved lintels of the Maya.

In some instances, many different purposes are aligned in one artwork or monument, and they work together as a fabulous and profound message from the past. This is particularly true in complex and extraordinarily skilled works, such as the Aztec Calendar Stone or the sarcophagus cover of the Maya King Pakal the Great at Palenque.

While we examine and explain each piece, we will learn about practices that gave rise to, or formed a context for, the art; these practices range from human sacrifice to ritual sex and ancestor worship. We'll consider why certain cultures prefer abstract designs over natural ones, how contemporary art is different from ancient art, why some of the earliest art is the most sophisticated, and the fact that Stone Age technology does not hinder skill or sophistication in art. We'll learn about beauty, proportion, labor, and the role of death and status in producing great artworks.

This course will leave you with a sense of excitement for these masterworks, some of which will be familiar to you and others, decidedly not. You'll learn what makes these masterpieces so valuable in both ancient and modern times; how extremely labor-intensive work, virtuosity in a craft, and rarity of materials combine to produce a valued object; and how value and aesthetics intersect. In the end, you will gain a new understanding of the importance of art to the human experience—across a vast range of time, space, and cultures.■

Where Do We Come From?

Lecture 1

Many, if not most, of our great works of art from classical, modern, and contemporary times have roots in the earliest art that was created. In this course, we will look at some of the most compelling and immediately understandable images of ancient times, as well as some enigmatic masterpieces of art that require careful explanation. Whether it is art from ancient Egypt or the abstract weavings of the Inca, though, there are common impulses at work. We will see how humans create art that serves a purpose in their societies, and we'll learn how that common thread winds its way down to the art of today.

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?

- The painting entitled *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* is a modern masterpiece by the post-Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin. To fully understanding this painting, we need to know about the civilizations that preceded our modern age.
- Gauguin drew on a knowledge of art that went far beyond the European tradition: He looked at and admired the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, Oceanic, Japanese, Javanese Buddhist, and even ancient Peruvian traditions of art and spirituality. He sought to escape from an unfeeling and complex industrial age—the modern world that was unfolding in the 19th century.
- The artist created this painting to tell the deeply moving saga of human life, seen as a narrative unscrolling from the right.
 - The baby at the extreme right is guarded over by a recumbent black dog and three coyly gesturing, seated Tahitian women. A golden statue-like figure at the center reaches for the sky to pluck a fruit.



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Gauguin was inspired by a few photographs he possessed of ancient artworks, including relief carvings from the Buddhist stupa of Borobudur.

- At the left and to the rear of center, a pale blue idol seems to bless the gathered group, which includes a goat, two white kittens, a colorful phoenix-like bird, and a white puffin.
- A dying old woman, leathery brown, is huddled to the left of a child eating fruit and a lovely young woman who seems lost in thought. All of this is set in a colorful, lush paradise of blue branches and blue seas.
- All the figures in the painting have direct ancestors in the art of other peoples. The blue idol, or deity statue, draws from the ancient Buddhas of Java; the old woman mimics a Peruvian mummy bundle; and the figures' postures and the images of animals recall Egyptian tomb painting.
- The painting evokes a longing for a lost paradise and a lost past. It also sets forth the idea that all humans are on a quest for meaning, which involves comprehending our past.

Beauty and Media

- Throughout this course, we will look at art that is mostly in the form of functional objects. These works date from 35,000 years ago to 600 years ago and come from vastly different parts of the world. What they have in common is that they are some of the best efforts of human creators.
- We will begin with painting on walls—the spectacular cave art at Chauvet in France. We will also look at architecture, usually of stone but also of mudbrick, and a great many sculptures, mostly of stone, as well. We will also see objects of ceramic, metalwork, and textiles.
- The survival of art from ancient times depends on vagaries of climate and material. Unfortunately, a great many works of art have not survived the test of time or the onslaught of human destruction. Further, not all art was meant by its makers to survive; the process of making the art was sometimes the most important aspect of a ritual.
- Some regions of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and the Amazon, are underrepresented in this course, again because the materials used disintegrated faster in these climates. Population centers are the major sources for most of the masterpieces we will see. Urban areas have more art and need more art—to reinforce group pride and identity and to show the hierarchy and rank of the leaders.

Why Is Ancient Art Important?

- Art is primarily a form of communication; it expresses ideas and thoughts of universal and particular interest. We may need help to “read” it for cultures that are foreign to us.
- Art tells us a great deal about diverse human responses to different climates, regions, threats, and population densities. How do different peoples adapt and evolve in different conditions around the world? The answers to these questions are often expressed in art.

- As we will see, ancient art had a number of practical functions: to communicate religious ideas; to depict calendrics (a society's approach to recording time over long periods), the structure of the cosmos, and the place of humans in the world; to show status or rank in society; to legitimize and propagandize a state; and sometimes to fulfill combinations of these purposes.

Universal Themes

- Art lays bare the concerns of humanity, some of which are universal and others, particular. As we learn more about ancient art, we will see certain themes expressed repeatedly, with different aesthetic styles and in varying media.
- The most elemental theme—and the one at the heart of all others—is survival and fertility. Gods associated with fertility can be either male or female and are usually the first gods we see in ancient art.
- Much art was also created to legitimize the status of a ruler; communities with a strong structure, usually led by a respected ruler, tended to survive better than looser communities with no clear head.
 - Many superb artworks serve as a form of visual propaganda for rulers, putting the ruler at the center of the cosmos and even deifying him in some cultures. Artworks often record a ruler's skill at warfare and conquest and show him as an intercessor between the gods and the populace.
 - The subject of warfare ties into rulership and the power of the state. The ruler and the people seek to protect and defend their lives and resources.
- Funerary rites or themes are extremely important in ancient art, and artworks expressing these themes are often all that survive from a culture. Grave goods can be attempts to overcome death or achieve rebirth. We also see religious, mythic, and cosmic imagery that attempts to explain the universe.

- Animals are an extremely important theme and subject in ancient art. As metaphors for many concepts and qualities, animals could express ideas about the cosmos and universe. Their dominance in ancient art is the result of our debt to them; we rely on animals for food, are threatened by them, and admire their special qualities, such as the flight of birds.
- Some themes and concerns in art vary from culture to culture. For example, the Greeks emphasized athletic competition in Classical times, as well as human subjects rather than animals. Ancient American cultures emphasized blood and human sacrifice.
- We will also see many “mountains” in this course—pyramids and temple platforms. Such structures bring humans closer to the heavens and the realm of the gods. These mountains could be used for different purposes, including the performance of a ritual or the burial of a king.
- Ancient art was not art for art’s sake. The masterpieces we will see were all functional in some manner. They worked in some way to define and strengthen a community.

A Definition of Masterpieces

- Most objects from ancient times that we deem art today were created for a function, often a religious one, and might not ever have been labeled art.
- “Master,” of course, implies the highest skill. An art object that is a masterpiece must inspire awe. It must speak to us and impress us in ways that other objects don’t or can’t. It pleases us in a sensual way and may challenge us intellectually, as well.
- Thus, an artwork’s success can consist of expressing symbolism or narrative extremely well, as we will see in the Parthenon frieze. Or it might consist of rare, precious materials and colors, handled so deftly that they spark a reaction of awe.

- Other attributes that might contribute to making a masterpiece include size, verisimilitude (that is, the copying of nature in an inspired way), expression of motion in a naturalistic manner (though this was not a goal in every culture), complexity of skill, success at expressing a message, and mystery.

Artistic Styles

- Why do different regional styles of art exist? Part of the answer is that style depends on the materials used for art, as well as the need for group affiliation. Style gives us instant visual understanding of who someone is and what group he or she belongs to.
- Style propagates a visual message to a populace. This can be a message of pride, as at the Parthenon, or control, as in the Inca Empire. Style can exert command over a diverse population and remind people of a bureaucratic and centralized authority, particularly in an illiterate civilization or society.
- Style and realistic representations can be a choice, made according to the demands of the culture creating them. Early Mesopotamian art, for example, shows careful renderings of animals, but the human body was usually represented as a cylindrical shape, without concern for imitating nature. Andean groups preferred abstract shapes, colors, and the creation of supernatural creatures.

Course Preview

- Much of what we will see in this course comes from a funerary context, and the main theme of this art is the search for immortality. Cultural differences are evident in the artwork created for death, but death itself is emphatically marked everywhere.
- The stage of development and religious beliefs of a culture had significant effects on its artistic output. We will see differing levels of population density and complexity of society through time.

- The ancient works we will see will take us from the dawn of art—with the cave painting of Chauvet about 35,000 years ago—up to much more recent times in the Americas—A.D. 800 and even later.
- To some extent, the art we will see was chosen on the basis of the technical development of the society that produced it and when it was settled.
- We will look at art from different geographic regions. Beginning in the next lecture with a Paleolithic cave in France, we will go to the Near East, Egypt, Greece, Rome, China, India, and Southeast Asia, and we will end in the New World—the Americas.

Suggested Reading

Boardman, *The World of Ancient Art*.

Pasztory, *Thinking with Things*.

Scarre, ed., *The Seventy Wonders of the Ancient World*.

Siliotti, ed., *The Hidden Treasures of Antiquity*.

Questions to Consider

1. What were the concerns addressed in art of the ancient world, and what can we learn about human development from these artworks and their themes?
2. How do climate of origin and medium of an artwork affect how we think about ancient art, what we see of ancient art, and what we consider a masterpiece?

Ancient Cave Art—Chauvet, France

Lecture 2

The cave of Chauvet in the Ardèche valley of France contains the earliest known art made by humans—depictions of bears, panthers, horses, and more, made 30,000 years ago. Examining this art closely gives us a great deal of information about the humans who created it—what their lives, beliefs, and environment must have been like. Because these cave paintings represent some of the earliest human artistic efforts that we know of, Chauvet also teaches us something about art itself. When we look at the location, materials used, subject matter, style, groupings, and skill, we can begin to speculate about the purpose of the art.

Overview of the Cave

- Chauvet is an extraordinarily large cave, with a complex arrangement of chambers. Cave bears lived there and left traces—their bones, claw scratchings, and even impressions of their bodies.
- The deepest, most remote recesses of the cave are where the most interesting figural art appears. The animal depictions found there are sketched mostly in charcoal black pigments, with fewer painted in red. Animals are either painted on the walls or deeply engraved on previously scraped and prepared areas.
- Some of the animals at Chauvet appear in magnificent, coherent groups, such as the so-called Panel of the Horses, which has horses, felines, rhinos, and bison. In other places, animal representations are less organized; they appear willy-nilly, sometimes with one painted or scratched over another. Handprints in red appear closest to the entrance, while the skull of a bear sits on an altar-like projection at the very back.
- About 13 species of animals—large and mostly dangerous—appear in the cave paintings. Lions, cave bears, mammoths, and rhinoceroses make up 63 percent of all the animal images. In later

caves, we see more herd animals, those that were less dangerous and were hunted.

Rhinoceros Depictions

- Depictions of rhinoceroses were unusual in cave art before Chauvet was discovered. These animals were probably both feared and admired, perhaps because of their unusual skin and horns, as well as their menacing appearance and behavior.
- About 17 rhinos are depicted in the End Chamber, which is a uniquely large grouping in cave art.
- The repetition of horns in the rhino drawings could be interpreted as an attempt to indicate numerous rhinos with overlapping horns. This technique is used much later in ancient art, among the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, to show multiples of people or animals. It's also possible that the artist was showing the motion of the rhino.
- Whatever the intent, the repetition shows that conceptually, the artist put great forethought into this representation and wanted it to convey specific information about the animals.

Panel of the Horses

- Twenty animals are depicted in the Panel of the Horses. Most dramatic here is the scene of rhinos in battle, communicated to us in quick brushstrokes of charcoal. This fight scene is unusual. The artist was obviously aware of the behavior and appearance of the animals and perhaps even the relationships of one kind of animal to another.
- The horses on this panel belong to a different species from our modern domestic horses. They have short heads; highly arched necks; small eyes; and stiff, brush-like manes. They are closest to the modern Przewalski's horse, which is a descendant of these wild early horses. These Paleolithic horses are thought to have been hunted for meat.

- Horses had not yet come under the control of man, but it seems reasonable to assume that the beauty and agility of the horse was appreciated by the Paleolithic artist. In some depictions, the artist even shows the dark face and markings of an individual horse, as distinct from other members of the herd with lighter faces.
- Paleolithic artists were perceptive observers of the animals around them, more precise and meticulous recorders of the animals' appearances that we often give them credit for. Because human lives depended on these animals, this sort of close observation makes perfect sense.

Woolly Mammoths

- In other scenes at Chauvet, we see woolly mammoths. Some are engraved into the background, so their outlines appear white, and others are painted in charcoal. The quick outlines give us a clear sense of their lumbering size.
- These mammoths were impressive beasts. Unlike our popular impression of Paleolithic man as a mammoth hunter, it seems likely that the mammoth was too large and dangerous for human hunters to track and bring down often.

Panel of the Lions

- One of the most famous and spectacular scenes from Chauvet is the Panel of the Lions, found in the last chamber. It shows a pride of lions closing in for the kill on bison.
- The maneless lions are stretched out, as if they are stalking, and their feline muzzles are stippled with whiskers in some cases. There is charcoal shading of the heads, as if to indicate volume, and the artist employs what seems to be overlapping.
- The area for the panel appears to have been scraped in preparation for this scene, which shows remarkable organization and a sense of the dramatic moment. The sophistication of both thought and realization here is truly remarkable.

- The artists were able to express cogent characteristics of the appearance of the animals, such as the pupils of the eyes, panting mouths, erect ears, and the vagaries of the coat markings.
- At the same time, the lions coalesce in a scene that re-creates one of the most exciting and important moments of the lion hunt. There is a regard on the part of the artist for appearance, action, and organization.
- The representation of a pride of lions or herds of bison and horses elsewhere is probably intentional. Such a representation would imply that the artists and the group were seeing the animals as cooperative creatures, which they themselves had to be. Clearly, the analogy is between lions cooperating in order to achieve success in a hunt and humans doing the same thing.

Human Female Representation

- A stalactite in the End Chamber is inscribed with what looks like female human genitalia. This pubic region, perfectly fitted to the stalactite's shape, merges at the top with the upper part of a bison.
- Most of us would understand this as an allusion to the phenomenon of procreation and fertility. This may also be the first appearance of the human urge to create art showing hybrid beings. This combination of a woman's fertile parts with a dangerous or powerful animal perhaps helped these humans express ideas about survival and fecundity that were previously inchoate.
- This preoccupation with fertility and procreation is a theme that runs throughout the art of the ancient world, beginning at Chauvet.

The Drawings as Religious Expression

- Most likely, the reason for making these representations had to do with religious ritual. There is good evidence to assume that Paleolithic humans had a shamanistic tradition—meaning that they perceived the world as animate in all things—and a



© Inocybe/Wikimedia Commons/public domain

Animal depictions that appear in the cave include rhinos, cave bears, a panther, an owl, bison, reindeer, and *Megaloceros*, a now-extinct type of giant elk.

focus on appeasement of spirits and rituals of thanks for survival and sustenance.

- Paleolithic people also believed in, and sought transformation into, animals or spirits, which helped them communicate with and exhort the spirit world for assistance. For this reason, altered states were an important part of religion. It's believed that humans at Chauvet and in the Paleolithic in general entered into a trance state, quite possibly before being led into the cave in order to see the spirits that appeared on the walls within.
- Although we can never know exactly what they were thinking as they beheld these images on the cave walls, surely, the numinous presence of an otherworldly set of beings, on which the lives of the humans depended, must have touched them deeply. Seeing these drawings fulfilled their sense of belonging to something larger and more meaningful than pure survival.
- The drawings themselves may well have alluded to complex myths and stories. The superimposition of images in many caves showed that the

very act of drawing had some inherent spiritual meaning. The place in which these images were drawn had importance, too, with the outlines and shapes of the rock walls incorporated into the animal drawings.

- We learn from this earliest cave art that humans turned to observing the world around them for religious expression. It is interesting to note that cave artists did not represent plants but only animals and only very rarely humans. Their lives depended on the hunting and eating of animals and upon animals' renewal, which was not as easy to achieve as it was with flora.
- It's probably difficult to underestimate the importance of these cave images to ancient man. In a preliterate society, these images served as religious texts. They told the stories of the culture and embodied the hopes and wishes for survival and beyond.

Lessons Learned from Aurignacian Art

- Among the lessons we can learn from these Aurignacian artists is that our concern for survival and reproduction, though not as urgent or precarious now, is always present. And it's expressed in art. Whether it consists of animal images, fecund females, or virile men, it's not far from our minds.
- Our connection to animals, with whom we inhabit the world and which we eat, is profound and important. It was expressed in art even before images of humans were made. Animals were threatening to humans, and we had to learn to cope with these threats in order to survive. Part of that coping consisted of deifying these threats or turning their tremendous power to our advantage.
- Dominance is often expressed in art. In the cave, it's dominance of animals—predators over prey. These relationships translate later in history into signs of status or rank in a chieftdom or state.
- This art forces us to reconsider our own ideas about the development of art—what is ancient and used to be referred to as “primitive.” There is nothing primitive about this cave art. The style and skill we

see so early show us that style in art may have nothing to do with the relative degree of what we call “civilization.”

- Urban and literate societies have different needs in art than societies without texts. Art is all about communication and experience. It allows one person’s mind to glimpse into another’s. It allows one culture or group to see another’s concerns. But the manner in which these ideas are expressed visually is always unique to that culture and depends on factors that often have nothing to do with skill or relative advancement.
- In some respects, we have to throw out the common idea that visual culture progresses over time. In an earlier time, art was thought to start with hesitant strokes, crude abstractions, and not-quite-accurate renditions of life. But with the cave paintings from Chauvet, there can be no question that realism and skill are already in full flower.

Suggested Reading

Clotte, *Cave Art*.

———, *Chauvet Cave*.

Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave*.

Herzog, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (film).

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think the cave painters chose to paint these particular animals here, and why did they choose to paint so deep in a cave, where it was so difficult to work?
2. What does the extraordinary naturalism and skill shown in painting or incising the animals at Chauvet tell you about the Paleolithic mind? Can you relate this style to any sort of art you see today?

The Uruk Vase—Vision of an Ordered World

Lecture 3

The move to living in cities, sometimes called the urban revolution, took place about 5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. This was an exciting time in human history, with people inventing a new way of living and working together in close companionship. New forms of art and architecture were developed, along with writing, which allowed new social systems of administration, more complex trade, and a different form of art—narrative art, art that tells a coherent story. In this lecture, we'll look at one of the earliest and most important narrative art objects, the Uruk Vase, a large offering vessel of alabaster.

The City of Uruk

- Uruk was located in the land of Sumer, on the Euphrates River in southern Mesopotamia. Originally, it was the center of an important religious cult, one that developed surrounding the Sumerian goddess of fertility and abundance. The city gave its name to the historical period lasting from approximately 3500 to 3000 B.C.
- Uruk has both the earliest art of an urban center and the earliest literature. Gilgamesh, the famed legendary king of the Epic of Gilgamesh, was said to be ruler of the city. He supposedly built its famous walls for defense in a land that was, and still is, prone to conflict because of scarce resources.
- The famous vase from Uruk was created at the dawn of urban civilization. It is one of the most important works for understanding human ideas, rituals, and artistry. The story of the vase is put into the context of some of humanity's most basic and important technological developments in the last few thousand years: Farming, animal husbandry, irrigation, and nucleation of population are all represented in this artwork.

Description of the Vase

- The Uruk Vase, 1.05 meters in height, was found in an Uruk temple hoard in a precinct dedicated to the fertility goddess Inana, the most important deity in the city of Uruk. The vase, which is conical in shape and has a flared foot, probably dates to around 3100–3000 B.C.
- The vase depicts a narrative of the foundation of a civilization, and there are more specific ritual scenes at the top. All of these scenes are carved in shallow relief in five separate registers that circle the alabaster vessel.
- The vase reflects a hierarchically ordered worldview, with the main scene at the top showing the ritual presentation of gifts to the goddess Inana, most likely by the now-missing ruler figure.

Organization of the Registers

- Two undulating lines at the very bottom of the vase indicate rippling water, a scarce commodity in Mesopotamia and one on which all else depended.
- Above the water, two kinds of vegetation grow from a straight line representing the land. These alternating plants are the grains grown by early farmers, the most important of which was probably barley. This register, then, represents the flora—the agriculture that ultimately supports the community.
- Above the flora is the fauna: a register of sheep, alternating ewes and rams. These animals formed the basis of the temple herds and the wealth of the community. The fact that the two sexes alternate reflects reproduction.
 - The domestication of animals, and the various uses to which they were put, was still evolving. Sheep were important not only for meat and milk but also for the wool they produced and the development of the resulting textile industry.

- Sheep and goats were among the earliest animals domesticated, probably sometime around 10,000 or so years ago.
- In the larger middle register, above the animals, are nude humans. They are quite possibly priests—all similar men, naked, stocky, and bald, who bear gifts of produce from the land in varying kinds of containers. Their nakedness symbolizes their humility as they approach the goddess. They also form a sort of rhythmic procession in opposition to the animals below.
- At the very top of the vase is the largest and most important scene.
 - A large figure of a woman clothed in a long dress is being offered one of the baskets or pots of produce by a smaller, naked priest. This woman is the goddess Inana or the priestess who represents her.
 - We know her identity because behind her are two bundled reed gateposts with streamers, which are recognized to be her symbols from written texts of the time.
 - Inana's headgear was broken off in antiquity, so we cannot be sure that she wore the divine horns that would have identified her as a goddess.
 - Behind the presenting priest is the priest-ruler, though his figure is quite damaged. He wears a net skirt, which we know represented the ruler figures of the time.

Details of the Upper Register

- In the image on the Uruk Vase, the goddess, in essence, receives her bridegroom at the door of her temple dwelling. It seems that they are about to enact the rites of the sacred marriage ceremony. These figures form the center of a complex scene, one that tells us even more about the vase and Sumerian society when we read it further.

- Behind the goddess or priestess are two poles with rings and streamers. They represent the reed posts that stood at the doorways to the temples of Inana.
 - If we then “enter” the temple door, to the right, we find a large ram, similar to the ones illustrated below, except that he has two objects sitting on his back: a man standing on a platform and, slightly below, a woman standing on a platform.
 - The reed post is repeated in slightly smaller form behind this ram, as if to emphasize Inana’s presence in a visual way. We see more offerings or cultic gifts behind the ram. There are two large pots of produce similar to the ones carried by the naked men.
 - Then, there are two figures of animals—a goat and a lion—which would seem to be vessels in those forms, given that each has a spout on its back. Interestingly, we see two vases that look just like smaller versions of the Uruk Vase itself!
 - The appearance of these vases makes the whole scene self-referential. The artist is actually showing the object on which he is working in its own proper setting.
- It is believed that the priest-ruler in this ritual is uniting with the fertility goddess Inana, most likely in the rite known as the sacred marriage. Perhaps this anticipated consummation is meant metaphorically, but many scholars believe that the two figures actually engaged in a sexual union. This might have served the ruler well in terms of legitimizing his lineage; he could claim that his union with the “goddess” produced a semi-divine heir.
- The emphasis on alternating male and female elements in rhythmic repetition and on elements of sustenance seems to point to a cyclical renewal in a rite that is meant to ensure the fertility of the land.

The Sumerian Worldview

- The vase holds the key to understanding much of the art and worldview of the Sumerians of Mesopotamia: It shows the role of the priest-king, making offerings to the goddess, and the emphasis on the fertility of the earth. The rites shown here ensure provisions for the population and the temple complexes.
- The Uruk Vase is a complicated and sophisticated work of art. It encompasses the seasonal cyclicity of the land, the dependence of humans on flora and fauna to survive, and ultimately, their dependence on the largesse of the divinity who provides their sustenance.
- This remarkable and unique object presents us with an ordered and hierarchical world, as seen by one of the earliest complex societies on earth. Each realm is represented: the water, vegetable, animal, and human realm; the temple household; and the goddess or priestess and the king himself. Their functions and ritual activities are implied by the scenes.



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The use of lapis in ancient Mesopotamian sculptures gives evidence of the far-reaching trade routes and considerable wealth of the region.

The Uruk Head

- A life-size stone head of a woman was also found in the temple precinct of the goddess Inana at Uruk, although we cannot be sure that it is the goddess herself. It dates to sometime before 3000 B.C. and, like the Uruk Vase, is made of alabaster, a precious commodity in Mesopotamia.
- This mask-like carving of a woman's face is thought to have once had an attached wig of another material, possibly gold or another metal. Stone and metal were luxury goods that had to be imported,

and their use shows some of the wealth and prestige that the temple commanded.

- In fact, Mesopotamia, partly out of necessity, had a tradition of making “composite sculptures.”
- Unlike the later Greek tradition, which preferred carving a face or figure out of one piece of stone, the Mesopotamians incorporated different materials in their sculptures, such as gold, shell, carnelian, or lapis lazuli.
- The mouth and chin area of the Uruk Head are carved with extraordinary sensitivity and naturalism, in contrast to the eyes and eyebrows. Those features were inlaid with some semiprecious stone that is now missing.
- In the thousands of years before the Uruk urban revolution, female figurines, usually small, were used in some sort of domestic cult of fertility and have been found across the ancient Mediterranean. This head is a stark contrast to those anonymous objects. It is perhaps our first rendering of particular and unique features: The mouth and the cheeks are so sensitively modeled that it looks as if the head could be a likeness of an actual person, not a general idea of a woman.

Development of Artistic Conventions

- Sculpture, whether small or life-size, cannot convey the amount of information that scenes carved in relief can impart. An artist or ruler seeking to communicate a complex message would be more likely to use a carved-relief sculpture, like the Uruk Vase. In Mesopotamia, these reliefs are usually divided into registers.
- The long roll-out of a story, which we usually read from left to right, gives us the narrative movement that we crave as humans. A story is told in these artworks, but it's not always a specific one, such as a record of a specific event. It could be a representation of a recurring ritual, such as the worship of Inana or the sacred marriage.

- The invention of the cylinder seal, which could be rolled to any length on clay, showed the importance of the repetitive and rhythmic to the Mesopotamians. It also became a part of the Mesopotamian artistic convention.
- It may be hard to imagine today, but forms of art had to be invented at this very early age. In this lecture, we have seen two forms that are characteristic of the Mesopotamian culture: composite sculpture and the use of registers in relief sculpture. Some of these conventions were so useful that they became part of the visual vocabulary of art for thousands of years.

Suggested Reading

Aruz, ed., *Art of the First Cities*.

Aruz, Benzel, and Evans, eds., *Beyond Babylon*.

Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think the shape of this vase negatively or positively affected the way the artist presented his complex hierarchy of realms and his narrative?
2. From texts and from the vase, we know that the cult of the love and fertility goddess Inana was central to Uruk and Sumer. Do the scenes depicted on the vase give you a sense of the relationship among ruler, priests, goddess, and temple?

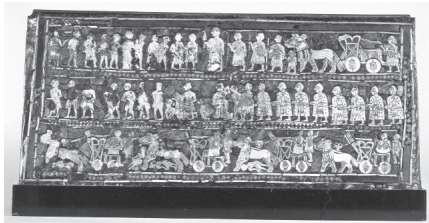
The Standard of Ur—Role of the King

Lecture 4

In this lecture, we will look at an unusual object, one whose function remains a mystery, although it has been named the Standard of Ur. It is a boxlike sculpture inlaid with colorful mosaics, excavated in Mesopotamia. It was initially thought to be an object borne aloft on a pole in order to identify a military unit. The mosaics tell us a great deal about life in early Sumerian society and the power of the ruler. They show scenes of war and a banquet with a ruler and repeat a theme found on the Uruk Vase—that of the abundance of the earth that ensures fertility for the people.

Discovery of the Royal Tombs at Ur

- In the 1920s and early 1930s, Sir Leonard Woolley, a British archaeologist excavating in what was then British Mesopotamia, discovered a cache of opulent tombs in Ur, on the floodplain of southern Mesopotamia.
- These discoveries were noteworthy not just for their contents but for the location of the dig: Ur is named in the book of Genesis as the home of Abraham, and the area itself is thought to be the location of the Garden of Eden.
- Although Uruk was one of the earliest and most prominent cities, by the early 3rd millennium, other temple-dominated city-states had emerged. Ur was one of the most important cities in this new stage of the development of human society and states.



The design of the Standard of Ur is hierarchical, and its layout in registers resembles that of the Uruk Vase.

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- The tombs discovered at Ur seem to date from about 2550 B.C. They were full of gold and silver jewelry and objects, as well as colorful and spectacular grave goods, including musical instruments, a golden ostrich egg, weapons, and even inlaid game boards. The tombs also seemed to show evidence of mass human sacrifice.
- To rescue wooden objects discovered in his excavations that had rotted away, Woolley used a method of pouring wet plaster into the holes created by the rotted wood and carefully brushing the dirt aside to reveal the plaster form of the lost article. In this way, Woolley was able to recover the trapezoidal-shaped box known as the Standard of Ur.
- The location of the box, near a man's shoulder, led Woolley to conclude that it had been carried as a standard in war. This mysterious object proved to be the most informative, beautiful, and enigmatic of Woolley's finds.

Description of the Standard

- The Standard of Ur consists of two panels that slope together toward the top and two triangular end pieces that are cut off at the top. All sides are covered by three registers of mosaics. The inlaid pieces consist of lapis lazuli, shell, and red limestone set into bitumen, a sticky oil byproduct found in Iraq.
- Traditionally, the two large sides have been called "War" and "Peace" because one side is organized around a depiction of a military campaign, and the other illustrates a banquet and files of people and animals.
 - These panels tell us a great deal about the dual roles of a ruler of a Sumerian city-state and Sumerian society at around 2550 B.C.
 - In the time when city-states first began to coalesce and population pressures made such resources as water and food

scarce in this arid land, a ruler had a special obligation to and role among his people: He was expected to be a leader in war.

“War”

- The “War” side of the Standard shows three registers of battle scenes and the aftermath of the fight. All are colorfully illustrated in inlays of red limestone, shell, and lapis. The action seems to begin, as it does in the Uruk Vase, at the bottom register.
- In the top register and at the very center stands a figure who is broader and taller than all the others. This outsize man holds what appears to be a staff and faces a group of men, who approach him. Those wearing kilt-like skirts with scalloped edges are soldiers. The naked, wounded men shown between them are prisoners captured in battle, and they are being presented to the ruler.
- Behind the ruler, to the left of the center, are his battlewagon and more soldiers with staffs. The battlewagon is a fairly large and unwieldy vehicle, drawn by four asses or onagers.
 - We know that these animals are not horses because their tails resemble that of an ass.
 - This detail tells us that these people at the beginning of the 3rd millennium B.C. were domesticating and taming animals, creating vehicles, and working on the sophisticated metal technology that allowed the wagons to be yoked to animals.
- In the second register is a scene of warfare. The Sumerian infantry, at the left, is a disciplined phalanx of soldiers, who are wearing some form of protective clothing, probably leather armor. They face a group on the right consisting of soldiers who are killing or leading off enemy prisoners.
- On the lowest register, we can see the force of battlewagons. The line of battlewagons begins at the left with a vehicle drawn by four asses or onagers. The outlines of the three animals behind the one in front help us understand their number. This technique of

overlapping gives us the sense of depth that today we might get from the use of perspective.

- The use of narrative can be seen in the quickening pace of the lower register.
 - The asses pulling the wagon to the right of the first one seem to have picked up speed; their gait is now a canter. Their legs are farther apart. Below them, in the space between the legs, lies a prone figure of a nude, dead enemy.
 - The rhythm picks up again with the next two groups, which seem to be moving even faster. This acceleration in these register scenes is, as far as we know, a new invention, one that we will see again in the Parthenon frieze.
- Note the rhythmic pattern in these scenes, not just of the individual groups, who vary between active and static poses, but also in the bright colors of the materials used to create the mosaic—the lapis lazuli and red limestone. The rhythmic pattern of colors punctuates the scene in a pleasing and sophisticated design.
- The “War” side asserts the dominance and leadership of a powerful ruler. He is portrayed as victorious and is set triumphantly amidst and atop the battle, complete with prisoners and dead enemies at the very bottom, below the galloping onagers.

“Peace”

- The opposite side of the standard depicts a large banquet at the top, often interpreted as a victory feast. Again, the ruler is the largest figure, seated with his men facing him as they lift their cups. Below are two registers of mostly bald men who guide different kinds of livestock and other goods, as if to show off the bounty of the land.
- The ruler holds a cup and wears a fleecy garment below the waist. He sits on a stool with animal-like legs. Three men standing near the ruler seem to be attendants for the banquet. To the extreme

right, we see a musician playing a lyre. A figure with longer hair at the right of the musician has his arms crossed, as if to sing.

- In the second register, we see the bald Sumerians, wearing similar fleece-bordered skirts and leading the animals of the land, probably to the ruler depicted above. This register moves in the opposite direction to the one above, setting up a rhythm similar to the movement in the Uruk Vase.
 - Animals are among the most carefully and frequently represented subjects of the Sumerians and most of the cultures of the ancient Near East. After all, it was from them that the bounties of the land flowed—meat, milk, cheese, wool, leather, and even transportation.
 - The last row, however shows a slightly different procession of bounty. These people are dressed differently, and some bear burdens on their backs, while others lead asses by their nose rings. It is thought that these people must come from elsewhere, most likely from the region later called Akkad.
 - Some scholars have interpreted this procession of goods as being the tribute brought by the losing side in the battle shown on the other side of the Standard.

The Role of the Ruler

- The two sides of the Standard could be showing the two sides of kingship itself: the role of the king as leader in war and his religious role as leader of his people in worshipping the gods. He is the one responsible for ensuring that the fecundity of the land continues to feed his people.
- We saw this theme earlier in the Uruk Vase. The ruler is positioned as the mediator to the goddess or the gods in general. His prayers and actions connect with the deities in order to support his people.
- The ruler not only was a protector of his city in war and conflict, but he was also responsible for the fertility of the land that provided

for his people. Inana is shown on the Uruk Vase as the deity before which the ruler appears, perhaps bringing gifts. Similarly, the banquet, which seems to be religious in nature on the Standard, positions the ruler at the top, receiving the bounty of the land.

- The two complementary sides of kingship—warrior and provider—are clearly illustrated in these Sumerian artworks, made many centuries apart. In fact, these aspects of kingship occur in artistic representation all over the world because they are the heart of the legitimacy of any ruler, who must defend and provide for his people.

The Message of the Standard

- The purpose of the Standard of Ur remains a mystery to us, but it nonetheless tells us a great deal. The society in which it was created was one of hierarchy and wealth. Its trade routes reached far and wide to receive the luxury goods of lapis from Afghanistan and red limestone, which may have come from India.
- In this society, elaborate mosaics were crafted by skilled artisans. This fact implies development of the society to the point that artists could devote themselves to their work while being supported by others.
- Rulers were depicted in such a way that their role above others in the society was legitimized. They were the conduit between earth and the heavens, between fertility and human survival.
- The Royal Cemetery at Ur, with its spectacular finds, gives us a picture of a society of dazzling richness and one of religious fervor. The surplus of luxury goods and, indeed, human attendants dispatched to the underworld represents a show of power and piety that has rarely been surpassed.

Suggested Reading

Aruz, ed., *Art of the First Cities*.

Aruz, Benzel, and Evans, eds., *Beyond Babylon*.

Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*.

Zettler and Horne, eds., *Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur*.

Questions to Consider

1. What can you assume about a ruler of Ur from this object in terms of authority, warfare, and control?
2. Do the functions and roles of the ruler in this standard remind you of any of the functions of modern heads of state? Do sustenance and warfare play a similarly large role for modern societies?

“Ram Caught in a Thicket”

Lecture 5

In this lecture, we look at another example of Sumerian art dug up from the remarkable cemetery at Ur, this one also arresting and unusually revealing of the culture that produced it. This piece, “Ram Caught in a Thicket,” speaks to us of the riches of Ur in its visual complexity. The animal represents the religious impulses and most basic beliefs and ideas of an early urban culture. It also emphasizes the ties of humans to animals.

The Great Death Pit

- The Great Death Pit of the Royal Cemetery at Ur contained the bodies of 73 attendants, probably put to death to accompany their ruler or priest to the underworld. In the death pit, Woolley discovered two sculptural figures of goats, one broken and the other crushed beneath the soil of the tomb.
- Woolley imagined that the attendants had been poisoned, but modern CT scans on some of the skulls he excavated have revealed that they were actually killed by blunt-force trauma to the back of the head. The cups some of them held may have been the symbol of a ritual banquet. The remains of many oxen, used to pull the carts of the deceased, were also found in the death pit.
- It seems clear that a great deal of time and trouble went into preparing the royalty at Ur for burial. This included killing dozens or hundreds of attendants and preparing their bodies for burial by treating them with heat. Burial rites also included killing service animals for the feasts and to provide transportation in the underworld.
- The two goats discovered by Woolley were typical Mesopotamian composite sculptures.
 - When Woolley first laid eyes on the crushed form in the soil, he realized that he had to save the shape, but the decomposed

core of wood made that a challenge. He and his colleagues used wax to hold the many parts they recovered together as they lifted them out of the soil.

- It turned out that they had myriad pieces of shell, lapis lazuli, gold, silver, copper, and red limestone. All were glued on or fused together with the bitumen. The mosaic technique used was similar to the Standard of Ur but much more difficult to execute because the figure was effectively a standing sculpture in the round.
- The Ram in a Thicket is thought to have been a support for an offering table or a delicate stand. Sumerian art always consisted of what we would consider functional objects.



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Symbolism of the Goats

- For Woolley, the animal he uncovered was reminiscent of a passage from Genesis (22:13), in which God orders Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. At the last moment, Abraham sees a ram caught in a thicket by his horns, which he then offers as a sacrifice instead of his son. But what Woolley had found was a goat, not a ram.

“Ram Caught in a Thicket” is most likely a representation of an impressive male markhor goat; this type of goat seemed to have symbolism related to its virility.
- Sheep and goats are actually rather similar species, and it’s difficult to tell them apart in the archaeological record. Sheep and goats were among the earliest animals to be domesticated in the ancient Near East, probably as early as 10,000 B.C.
 - There were also wild sheep and goats that existed before domestication and continued to roam the mountains.

These were the progenitors of the flocks from which other animals were domesticated.

- The sculpture seems most likely to be a markhor goat, which has corkscrew-shaped horns and a shaggy coat. The males are known for their fierce fights during courtship.
- Markhor goats are able to eat by standing up on their hind legs in order to reach the highest leaves on a bush. This position is also the one used for mating, and this type of goat seems to have had associations or symbolism related to its virility, like the bull.

Description of the Sculptures

- Each goat from Ur stands on its own decorated base that was covered in silver. It stands on hind legs and rests its forelegs on the branches of a gold-clad plant, one that is clearly not related to anything in nature.
- The underbelly of the goat is quite corroded on one example, while the other had gold male genitalia that were intact. The hind legs and forelegs were covered in gold, as was the face. The horns, beard, eyes, and heavy mane were carved from lapis lazuli. The ears are copper. The fleece on the rest of the body was made of individual white shell pieces carved with long lines delineating the hairs.
- A similar markhor goat depiction appears in Queen Puabi's grave at Ur. This one is shown as a victim of a lion attack; it appears upside down on a small cosmetic box.
 - The box is made from some of the same precious materials as the Ur rearing goat: carved shell and lapis lazuli. It's safe to assume that these materials, trade goods from as far away as Afghanistan, were meant to indicate both the wealth of the owner and, perhaps, the sanctity of the subject.

- The theme of forces of nature in conflict is a major one in the ancient art of Mesopotamia. The defeat of chaos by order, in fact, is a major duty and power of a ruler.

Fertility of the Land

- The theme of the fertility of the land also emerges in the goat sculptures. A major clue in identifying this theme is the plant on which the goat is feeding.
 - As mentioned earlier, this is not a realistic plant. It consists of a central trunk or stem and is topped by a single leaf, all covered in gold foil. The trunk has two gold branches, and from these emerge more leaves and a stylized rosette, the symbol of Inana, the goddess of fertility.
 - The goat represents the male force, virile and wild, perhaps. He represents the fauna of the land, as well. The plant is the symbol of the female and the plant world; the central leaf may be a bud or fruit.
 - Some scholars have seen the goat as not just nibbling at the plant but engaging in a form of sexual union with it. This is supported by the explicitly male genitalia that survived on one of the goats from Ur.
 - If this interpretation is true, the sculpture gives us the union of male and female, representing the fecundity of the earth. We also have the union of flora and fauna, which symbolizes the riches of the earth, as well. This would imply that the object is a sacred piece of temple furniture—one that embodies the most basic concerns of the Sumerians in their quest to survive in a harsh land.
- Additional evidence supports the fertility symbolism, seen in the dual roles of the Sumerian king.
 - We have already learned that Sumerian kings played two roles: protector and provider. As provider, the Sumerian king was expected to ensure the fertility of the earth by interceding with

the gods, particularly Inana. This explains the recurrence of the sacred marriage theme in both art and text.

- The ruler was really the *paterfamilias* in a sense. His legitimacy stemmed from his success in importuning the gods to provide crops and meat for his populace.
- From slightly later literature, we know of three primary concerns or themes of early Mesopotamians: the sacred marriage, which ensures regeneration and fertility of the land; the change of seasons, which marks a loss of fertility; and the primeval battle between the forces of chaos and order. These concerns are reflected in the role of the ruler, just as we saw on the Standard of Ur.
- The theme of fertility and union is also seen in the goat stand, which probably was part of some temple furniture. We see battles between gods and men, or wild and domestic animals, on the cylinder seals of the time and on the cosmetic box from Ur.
- An interesting seal provides us with more information about the role of the ruler and Inana. It dates earlier, to the time of the Uruk period and the Uruk Vase, but it bears a scene that relates to the "Ram Caught in a Thicket."
 - On the modern impression, we see a central figure, a bearded man in a net skirt. He wears the cap that we know symbolized rulership. He holds two branches with flowers that are exactly like the rosettes nibbled on by the Ur goat!
 - These branches and rosettes are a symbol of the goddess Inana and of the female creative force. The curving gateposts with streamers also indicate the temple of Inana and inform us that this is a sacred scene.
 - There are two animals on either side of the ruler figure, rearing up to nibble on the branches and the rosettes. These animals are

usually identified as bulls, but their twisted horns may indicate that they are screw-horned goats.

- The ruler, in his religious function, feeds the animals. He is central to the scene of regeneration and fecundity. Some scholars even believe that the ruler was meant to represent the consort of Inana, the vegetation god Dumuzi, who died and was reborn each spring.
- These fertility and regeneration gods explain and symbolize the cyclicity of the seasons. Placing the ruler at the center of this process legitimizes his rule and commands respect from his populace. Power can be expressed through these visual symbols of Inana, the animals, the plants, and the ruler.

Queen Puabi's Headdress

- The rosette floral motif appears in another spectacular find from the Royal Cemetery of Ur: the gold headdress worn by Queen Puabi.
- The queen was accompanied by numerous sacrificed handmaidens who wore similar but simpler headdresses. Sumerian women probably wore ornate braids or wigs that could be used to support such elaborate jewelry.
- The elements of the headdress include many feet of gold ribbon wrapped around the coiffure. Over these were laid hair rings and several wreaths of different kinds of gold leaves. The theme of vegetation and flora is associated with these women.
- There are rosettes made of gold on the head comb that surmounts the hair. There is also a wreath of rosettes below that, made of lapis, carnelian, and gold. The queen, loaded with such valuable and highly wrought adornments, occupied a central place in the burial and, most likely, the religious life of Ur.
- The headdress, however, is much more than a signifier of wealth. We now know from the rosettes that the queen and the many

accouterments in the tomb had a complex and abiding symbolism centered on the most basic concerns of the people who lived in this time and place. They wrapped their anxiety about survival and their concern with fertility of the land in a golden web of artistic brilliance.

Suggested Reading

Aruz, ed., *Art of the First Cities*.

Aruz, Benzel, and Evans, eds., *Beyond Babylon*.

Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*.

Zettler and Horne, eds., *Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur*.

Questions to Consider

1. The theme of fertility and the symbolism used to represent it are fairly complex in the Ur cemetery grave goods. Do you think that most citizens of Ur would have understood the symbolism of the goat sculpture?
2. The use of the goat as a male metaphor and the rosette plant as a female metaphor evokes fertility symbolism. How do you think this served the concerns of a desert society?

Great Ziggurat at Ur—Ancient Architecture

Lecture 6

One of the first monumental temples built in antiquity still rises majestically from the desert floor in southern Iraq. This remarkable temple tower is the best preserved example of what was once a plentiful and magnificent form of ancient architecture: the ziggurat. This was essentially a staged temple tower, the type of structure most characteristic of worship in Mesopotamia. Indeed, Mesopotamia was one of the first places to create such grand and monumental architecture devoted to the gods and to worship. In many respects, ziggurats and other types of pyramids, from Egypt to Mexico, are artificial mountains with sacred meanings.

The Cradle of Civilization

- Urban societies first began in southern Mesopotamia, near the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This area, called by the Greeks the “land between two rivers,” was often arid, with unpredictable rainfall, in the 4th and 3rd millennia B.C., but it was not the desert it is today. The city of Ur sprang up on the banks of the Euphrates River, several centuries after the city of Uruk rose to importance.
- The towns that developed into cities in southern Mesopotamia in the early 3rd millennium B.C. belonged to the Sumerians. They were a somewhat mysterious people who spoke a language that has no known relatives. It’s thought that Sumerians probably developed the world’s first writing, cities, schools, and temple bureaucracies.
- Each Sumerian city-state was organized around the worship of a particular deity. In the past, the Sumerian style of government has been called a theocratic state because the temple of the primary god was a wealthy entity that controlled land, flocks, and other goods.
 - Offerings were made to the deities in the temple complex, and wealth and goods could be redistributed by the temple’s personnel.



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The architecture created in many ancient societies, from Egypt to Mexico, reached for the sky, recognized as the domain of deities.

- The Ziggurat of Ur, in fact, was just one part of a larger temple complex; most of its ancillary buildings have long vanished in the sand. It was in the center of the town and at the center of its daily life.
- The city of Ur was devoted to the moon god Nanna, also known as Sin, and it is to this god that the Ziggurat of Ur was dedicated. This particular ziggurat is the best preserved surviving example of what was once a flourishing building form.

The Ziggurat Form

- The main building material of Mesopotamia was mudbrick, which is a mixture of clay and straw. The clay was pressed into rectangular molds and left to dry in the sun. After drying, the clay was turned out of the molds and used as the building blocks of cities. The mudbricks were not always permanent—unbaked clay can be eroded by moisture and wind. If more permanence was desired, the bricks were baked.

- Some of the earliest examples of temple architecture in Mesopotamia can be found at the site of Uruk. They date from sometime around 3100 B.C. The White Temple at Uruk is raised on a terrace about 13 meters high with a sloping side. This structure can be thought of as a proto-ziggurat. Indeed, the notion of a series of stepped terraces may have begun at Uruk with these early examples. The sacred spaces were elevated above the plain.
- It's believed that Mesopotamians usually built their temples on top of older and simpler sacred structures. This was probably true of Ur, which was founded in the 4th millennium B.C.
- Ziggurats were not standalone buildings. They were approached through a courtyard, and there were many structures in the vicinity of the ziggurat, some of religious importance and some not.

The Ziggurat of Ur

- The ziggurat we see now was first built by a king named Ur-nammu and his son Shulgi around 2100 B.C. Ur-nammu ruled from 2112 to 2095 B.C. and was the founder and most important king of the third dynasty of Ur.
- Ur-nammu had his workmen create thousands of mudbricks, some fired, but most not. The bricks were stamped with Ur-nammu's name. The workmen built the lowest course of the temple into a rectangular platform that measured, at the ground, 62.5 by 43 meters (205 by 141 feet). It was 11 meters, or 36 feet, high. This rectangular footprint was carefully oriented to the points of the compass.
- The second platform was half the height of the first and measured about 36 by 26 meters (118 by 85 feet). The third platform or terrace has been lost but may have been about 2.9 meters (9.5 feet) high. A smaller shrine stood atop the third platform but was destroyed.
- The entire structure was built from mudbricks and then clothed in a coating of fired bricks laid carefully in waterproof bitumen. Holes pierce the inward-sloping walls to allow water to evaporate from

the solid core. The terraces have a niched, or shallow-buttressed, façade, which is typical of Mesopotamian buildings and allowed a striking interplay of light and shadow. There were also larger buttresses on either side of its main staircase.

- The Sumerian architects made the three façades without stairways bulge and curve outwardly in the center. This sort of adjustment gave the building a feeling of more weight and solidity; something similar can be seen in the Parthenon (447–438 B.C.).
- The ziggurat has three staircases, each composed of 100 steps. The main staircase leads straight up the front of the building to a gatehouse, which covers it at the juncture with the side staircases, then continues to the top. This staircase may have been the one used by priests to gain access to the shrine at the top.
 - The two subsidiary stairways at the side of the temple, meeting at the gate, may have been used by priests or for more domestic access. Usually, access to Mesopotamian shrines was quite restricted, but someone had to carry food and goods up to the shrine at the top.
 - The overall effect of the main façade with the three stairways was an impressive one. The stairways seem to weave together at the gate and then funnel the people or the procession to the last stages of the temple tower.
- The first terrace or story of the Ziggurat of Ur dates to Ur-nammu's time, around 2100 B.C. It is thought that the second and third stories were extensively restored by the Babylonian king Nabonidus (555–539 B.C.). Other kings, both before and after Nabonidus, also restored the building and may have altered it in different ways.
 - In an attempt to associate himself with the storied rulers of Iraq's glorious past, Saddam Hussein restored parts of the Ziggurat of Ur.
 - Ur-nammu was known for an ambitious program of architecture and built ziggurats and other religious architecture in many

cities of southern Mesopotamia. It is this tradition that such modern leaders as Hussein have tried to emulate.

- The building of such temples was associated from the first with the religious duties of a king. Building temples showed that the king was pious but also served to emphasize his power through visual means.

Symbolism of the Ziggurat

- The shrine that stood on top of a ziggurat may have been used as a bedchamber for the sacred marriage ritual. The Greek historian Herodotus, writing about the famous ziggurat in Babylon in 440 B.C., tells us that the shrine there had an “exceptionally large” and “richly decorated” bed that was occupied by only the god himself or a woman chosen by the god.
 - Herodotus was not always the most accurate historian, but other sources of the time support his account.
 - According to some sources, the sacred marriage ceremony was enacted on top of the ziggurat. This meant that the high priestess engaged in ritual marriage with the god, perhaps embodied in the person of the king. This ceremony of sexual union, which is incompletely understood, would have ensured the fertility and prosperity of the land.
 - We saw this theme of fertility and sacred marriage in the Uruk Vase, where a king brings produce and gifts to Inana, the fertility goddess. She is the deity most often associated with the sacred marriage ritual, and she unites with the vegetation god, Dumuzi.
 - We saw similar symbolism of this union and the duality of the sexes and flora and fauna in the gold goat from the cemetery at Ur. It’s clear that the concerns of the Sumerian populace, and others down through time in this harsh land, centered on sustenance and prosperity.

- The impulse of reaching toward heights, toward the divine, is something that seems to bridge many cultures. Egypt is credited with the original idea of the massive, smooth-sided pyramid, but the stepped temple tower of Mesopotamia seems to have been an early contemporary, if not forerunner, of the pyramid. The shape is similar to the radial pyramid of the Maya in Mexico and the famous stepped pyramid at Chichén Itzá in Central America.
- The differences, however, are important. The Egyptian pyramids were used solely as funerary monuments and were not meant to be entered or climbed; royal tombs were locked deep within. The top of an Egyptian pyramid is triangular and continuous with the building's body, which was based on a square.
- The ziggurat, in contrast, was usually rectangular at the base. It was meant to be climbed and was built with stairs to gain access to the shrine at the top. There, ceremonies, such as the sacred marriage, would be enacted by rulers, priests, and priestesses. The stairways provided an impressive backdrop for a ceremonial procession. That kind of performance also occurred at the Mexican pyramids of Teotihuacán and at Maya temples.
- What all these manmade mountains had in common, however, was the desire to reach the skies and the divine in some manner. Whether sky god or constellation, fertility or weather divinity, all had some connection with the heavens and could be approached more closely from the height of that elevated shrine.
- The sacred space created by the pyramid or ziggurat could also be used to reinforce the ruler's legitimacy as a semi-divine figure in his own right. In the Mesopotamian ziggurat, the ruler most likely engaged in rituals on top of the temple and may have impersonated a god.
- In the cultures in which they appear, pyramids or artificial mountains had a great many symbolic meanings and functioned as monumental reminders of the power of the gods, the ruler, the state, and even the cosmos.

Suggested Reading

Aruz, ed., *Art of the First Cities*.

Aruz, Benzel, and Evans, eds., *Beyond Babylon*.

Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*.

Zettler and Horne, eds., *Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do staged temple platforms lend themselves to worship and ritual that might lead to a city's greater cohesiveness?
2. How does a ziggurat compare to other sacred mountains or structures, such as the Egyptian pyramids?

Victory Stela of Naram-Sin of Akkad

Lecture 7

In the last lecture, we saw a magnificent building that was a unique type, characteristic of the Mesopotamians. The Ziggurat of Ur was a large and central symbol of the city's god and a vital part of its economy and community life. For rulers, the building of a city's temple was truly considered a necessary duty. But a temple could also serve as a monument proclaiming the ruler's piety and power. In this lecture, we will look at another art object that depicts the role of the ruler in Mesopotamia—the Victory Stela of Naram-Sin. It is a groundbreaking piece because it had the audacity to proclaim the divinity of the ruler!

Who Was Naram-Sin?

- Naram-Sin was the grandson of the founder of the dynasty of Akkad, Sargon the Great (c. 2300 B.C.). The Akkadians were a Semitic-speaking group, who were predominant slightly to the north but had been a part of the population for an unknown time in the land of Sumer, to the south.
 - The Akkadians expanded their scope through battle and conquered enough land to be called an empire. Their language became the primary one. Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium is often called the land of Sumer and Akkad.
 - War was central to the Akkadians' power, and they created the largest empire then known. For the first time, remarkably, all of Mesopotamia, with its varied lands, was united under one king.
- Naram-Sin was the mightiest ruler of the kingdom of Akkad. The empire reached its peak under his reign. The capital of Akkad, a city called Agade, has never been found.
- Naram-Sin expanded his empire greatly and celebrated his victories by commemorating them with stelae—large stone monuments, usually carved on both sides and with a rounded top. We also know,

from an inscription on another statue, that he declared himself as divine during his lifetime, calling himself “king of the four quarters, king of the universe.”

Description of the Stela

- To show that he was a divine king, Naram-Sin needed a new “visual vocabulary.” His Victory Stela is startlingly innovative in this sense, even though it is difficult for us moderns to imagine that something like this imagery had to be invented. Indeed, some of the greatest art and stylistic innovations of ancient times were created in the short time that the Akkadians were in power.



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The Victory Stela of Naram-Sin reveals the king's conscious strategy to have himself depicted as a perfect and manly ruler; it's as if he campaigned to be both ruler and god.

- The great Mesopotamian art scholar Henri Frankfort contended that Mesopotamians felt a tension between the “love of design for its own sake, and ... a delight in physical reality.” Akkadian art veers toward the latter; it is robust, muscular, and reality based.
- Naram-Sin had this particular stela made to commemorate his victory in battle over the Lullubi, a group of people who lived in the Zagros Mountains, in what is today western Iran. The monument (about 6.5 feet tall) was erected in the city of Sippar. Later rulers seemed to covet it, and it was looted from its original site.
- As you may recall, the Standard of Ur neatly organized the scenes of battle into registers. But in this later stela, the artist has unified the whole battle into one undivided composition. The scene is now set in what seems to be a real landscape, with naturalistic elements.

- Instead of the strong horizontals and rhythmic elements we've seen before, the scene is represented with strong diagonal elements, making it much more dramatic and emotionally evocative.
- The diagonals imply movement, and their use is something we also see frequently in dramatic historical scenes painted in Western art, such as those of Rembrandt or Rubens.
- Note that the stela also has a pyramidal composition. Naram-sin strides triumphant at the top. His wide stance conveys dominance, and he carries his weapons with bold assurance. He is the picture of confident leadership in battle.
 - The body of Naram-Sin is real here—muscular, masculine, and in action. His calf muscles and biceps bulge, and his torso is robustly modeled. He has a long and manly beard. He looks vigorous and virile. The fact that he is larger than all the other men on the stela and is surrounded by space serves to make him the center of attention.
 - He alone confronts the divine, by placing himself next to the steep mountain and closest to the divine symbols at the top. He is the focus of the scene. And we know he is divine because he wears the Mesopotamian symbol of divinity—the horned helmet.
- Naram-Sin strides upward, and his soldiers march behind (and under) him in organized diagonals. The Lullubi, in contrast, are disorganized.
 - An enemy soldier is crushed, bent and broken, beneath Naram-Sin's feet. Another enemy kneeling before him tries to pull the spear from his neck, looking as if he is begging for mercy.
 - Other disorganized and pathetic-looking Lullubi are placed on the right half of the composition. They seem to be pleading to be spared an awful fate. A wonderfully rendered tree,

not a generic one, breaks up their mass and interrupts their beseeching gestures.

- We get the feeling that Naram-Sin's relentless military force, identically dressed, is led by a god/king of such great force and power that anything is possible.
- The general triangular, sloping shape of the stela is not typical. This innovation reinforces the newness and force of the composition. The unified field and narrowing shape bring the focus to the king. Even in its own time, the stela was acknowledged as a singularly effective and majestic work of art.

The Visual Vocabulary of Kingship and Divinity

- As we know from the Standard of Ur, the king was already depicted as larger than life in some of the earliest art. The Sumerians developed a new visual vocabulary for denoting kingship, including a characteristic coiffure. Around 3100 B.C., art shows the king wearing his hair in a thick plait around his head with a chignon in back. A few centuries later, this distinctive style was incorporated in helmets. This sort of headgear is seen in Akkadian times, as well.
- One of the best known examples of Akkadian metalwork is believed to show either Naram-Sin or Sargon.
 - The elaborate plaited hair around the king's head is modeled after the Sumerian insignia of kingship, and he wears the chignon. His luxuriant beard is carefully modeled, down to its individual ringlets, and the smooth and sensitive modeling of the cheeks shows more of an individual than a generic man.
 - The difference between the more generic look of the Sumerian rulers and this Akkadian head is vast in a stylistic sense. The lips, for example, are thick, sensuous, and very naturalistic. The eyes were gouged out in antiquity, probably by an enemy, but they would have had realistic-looking inlays of another material.

- Naram-Sin chose a new approach to signify his new conception of kingship. To depict himself as a divine being, he donned the helmet with horns that we see in the Victory Stela. Horns were used from the earliest times in the ancient Near East to indicate a figure's divine status.

A New Approach to Narrative

- The Akkadian period was a unique and special time for artistic experimentation. We see, for example, an Akkadian cylinder seal from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts that shows a coherent scene with action.
 - A hunt is taking place in mountainous terrain, and the hunters are chasing different kinds of animals. The small scene is compelling because it is unified and specific.
 - Unlike earlier cylinder seals, which were carved to mostly show decorative patterns and friezes of combatants or temple events, this one puts the action into a specific-looking place and uses the totality of the space to indicate some sort of depth of field.
- Perspective was not something that Mesopotamian artists employed. As we can see in the Naram-Sin stela, the communication of a message about the king and his role was paramount, and nothing could interfere with that. The specifics of a battle could be shown, but the idea of using art to create an illusion of reality was not appealing.
- More important, the narrative of defeat of an enemy was tweaked in the stela, so that the broken bodies of the individual enemies seem to locate the action in a more specific time. If we go back to the Standard of Ur, we remember that the enemy bodies lay nude beneath the onagers' galloping feet.
 - The idea of depicting the enemy underfoot and in such a state of defeat or death is practically universal: Many Andean cultures did this, as did the Maya. And in Egypt, it was *de rigueur* to

show the enemies of the pharaoh beneath his feet on an endless series of monuments.

- Such attempts to humiliate the enemy are not unknown in our own time—just think of soldiers desecrating the bodies of their enemies and then taking pictures. And depicting the enemy nude is one aspect of that humiliation. In fact, lines of prisoners being marched nude to some sort of unpleasant fate pop up everywhere. A universal language of loss and humiliation, death and defeat, seems to have developed similarly in many places in the world.
- As we'll see in the next lecture, the Assyrians, using many similar symbols and conventions, reached a pinnacle of narrative art. Like the Victory Stela of Naram-Sin, Assyrian artworks served as part of the visual propaganda that set the Assyrian king apart from the rest of humanity and gave him the legitimacy to wage war and wield power over his subjects.

Suggested Reading

Aruz, ed., *Art of the First Cities*.

Aruz, Benzel, and Evans, eds., *Beyond Babylon*.

Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*.

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways does the ruler separate himself from his people visually?
2. How does the organization of the scene on the stela serve as propaganda for the Akkadian Empire?

Neo-Assyrian Palace Reliefs

Lecture 8

At its peak, the Assyrian Empire dominated a huge swath of land, from the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. It was centered in the northern part of Mesopotamia, where the modern states of Iraq and Syria now exist. Assyrian kings built enormous palaces to demonstrate their power, and stone reliefs were carved to decorate the mudbrick walls and to show the divinity of the Assyrian king. We have seen these themes of royal power earlier in complex societies and will see them again, from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt to Mexico and beyond. In this lecture, we'll look at the thread that connects them all, which is rooted in the human need for power, certainty, and order.

Themes and Subjects of Assyrian Art

- The Assyrians were a Semitic-speaking people who came to power in the 2nd millennium B.C. in northern Mesopotamia. We know them as the Old Assyrians in the beginning of the 2nd millennium and the Middle Assyrians in the middle of the same millennium and later. The 1st-millennium Assyrians are often called Neo-Assyrian. The name, Assyria, is a variation derived from the main god of Assyria, Ashur.
- As the Assyrians rose to prominence in the 1st millennium, their power grew and their art reached a pinnacle of magnificence. It was sophisticated and skilled, yet it expressed many of the same themes we have seen in earlier art in Mesopotamia and, indeed, other parts of the ancient world.
 - Earlier, we looked at a stela from the kingdom of Akkad, the earliest empire in Mesopotamia (3rd millennium B.C.). On this stela, Naram-Sin used the tool of art to express his power and dominance over the lands he conquered.
 - This approach to visual reinforcement of power and intimidation of enemies turned out to be a successful strategy

for ruling. Thus, much of the visual vocabulary of the ruler in the ancient Near East remained more or less the same, in content if not in style, for three millennia.

- The Assyrian reliefs, however, rather than using the single, unified composition of one battle on a stela, as we saw on the Akkadian Victory Stela, go back to an older model.
 - Early in Sumerian times, from the Royal Cemetery at Ur, we saw a depiction of battle in the Standard of Ur. In this piece, the battle unrolled in registers, enabling a narrative of different times and events to be told.
 - In a relief carving from the Assyrian Empire in the 7th century B.C., we see a more complex, chaotic scene of battle, but the drama is similar in conception to an Akkadian stela from around 2250 B.C.
- The subject of war and victory, with a rout of the enemy, was something of a delight to rulers. Assyrian rulers went to great pains to have a narrative of their conquests and individual battles rendered in stone for their palaces.
 - We see, for example, the famous battle of Lachish, which is mentioned in the Bible. It was here that the earlier Assyrian king Sennacherib fought the Judeans in 701 B.C. In his palace at Nineveh, in the northern part of Mesopotamia, he proudly displayed scenes from the battle.
 - The artist here was careful to include the impalement of enemy troops. Beheading of enemies was also depicted, and the heads were sometimes used to play catch.
 - The intimidation of the enemy and the glorification of the ruler in war served as important visual propaganda to bolster the influence and power of any ruler. Images of brutal and ruthless treatment of enemies deterred rebellion, in addition to recording the martial accomplishments of the ruler.



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The theme of the lion hunt was represented for three millennia in Mesopotamia; it symbolizes the ruler protecting his people and repelling the forces of chaos.

The Lion Hunt

- In the famous relief known as the Lion Hunt, we see an Assyrian king engaged in battle with lions, using a bow, spear, and dagger.
 - The lion here represents not only a dangerous predator but the forces of the wild and, thus, of chaos. The king conquers the forces of nature and has the stamina and capability to dominate an enemy, whether animal or human.
 - But there is more to this carving than a depiction of the king's bold and courageous character. This relief sits squarely in the narrative tradition of Mesopotamia and the role of the king in the powers of the region.
- The Lion Hunt Stela prefigures the Assyrian Lion Hunt by about 2,000 years. It is an eroded and unsophisticated stone carving, depicting a man spearing a lion in the top section and one shooting

an arrow at a lion below. The two men are most likely the same person, a priest-king, shown twice.

- The theme of the lion hunt was represented for three millennia in Mesopotamia, starting with this stela. This theme obviously had resonance for the king and the populace. It showed a ruler doing what was expected of him: protecting his people from dangerous predators. On another level, it meant he was restoring order and repelling chaotic forces of the wild.
 - Lions deserve the epithet “king of beasts.” Unlike other predators, lions are not afraid and will stand their ground when challenged. This was interpreted as a sign of nobility and courage. They are also extremely territorial, and their roar is a feared and chilling deterrent to foes.
 - The lion was not only a feared predator but also a noble competitor. Any foe who vanquished a lion was truly worthy. They were the king of beasts, and kings were their natural conquerors.
- Early cultures prized excellence in hunting for practical reasons, but the symbolic reasons were prized even more. Kings in most cultures have been associated with hunting, and the theme of the royal hunt is especially important in ancient Near Eastern art. Lions, in this era, were reserved for the royal hunt. In fact, the association of royalty with lion hunting led to this imagery being used on the Assyrian royal seal!
- In an earlier Assyrian depiction of a lion hunt from the reign of Ashurnasirpal II in Nimrūd (883–859 B.C.), the king is in a chariot, shooting an arrow at a lion that is not shown. One of the king’s dead quarry fills the space beneath the galloping horses’ feet.
 - The artists used realistic details to record the scene, including showing how the stallions’ ears were laid back in their nervousness and fear of the lion.

- Note also that the textures of the lion's fur, the mane, and the clothes of the Assyrians are rendered in striking detail and with great accuracy.
- In the much earlier Uruk Lion Hunt Stela, a priest-king dramatically kills lions, thrusting his spear diagonally and emphatically into the top lion, who is rearing up. At the bottom, he seems to shoot another lion with an arrow directly in the face at close range. The field is littered with lions. The ruler is triumphant. This is the first known example of a lion hunt in the ancient Near East.
- In the much later scene of the famous Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (668–631 B.C.), he is spearing a leaping lion in the mouth from his horse.
 - Note that the diagonal line created by the spear is continued into the lengthened body of the lion and reflects the lower leg of the horse. There is quite a bit of empty space around this scene, which is unlike most Assyrian reliefs, but this approach heightens the dramatic effect by isolating the most chilling moment.
 - Note, too, that the details of dress, of harness, and of the animals are rendered impeccably and with great attention to the musculature and movement of animal and human. It's the same subject as the Uruk Lion Hunt Stela but with infinitely more sophistication and polish.
- The other scene with Ashurbanipal shows the intimate and dramatic moment when the upright king delivers the *coup de grace*—a dagger in the chest of the still roaring and attacking lion. The king is calm and shows no fear; the lion already has an arrow in his head.
 - Violence in Assyria was a means to an end, and that end was order. Here is the king, reinforcing that order.
 - In the process of putting things right in the world, he also demonstrates almost superhuman bravery. The royal hunts

glorified the king and showed the boundless royal achievement. They were also religious in nature.

Action in the Arena

- An Assyrian relief now in the British Museum tells us how these lion hunts actually took place. The relief reads as a narrative in three registers, from right to left and top to bottom. As with most narrative Assyrian reliefs of this era, the top registers are action scenes, and the bottom one is a culminating scene.
- At the top right, a lion is being released from a cage. This tells us that the lion was brought from elsewhere. In fact, the action is believed to have been taken place in an arena, not on the steppes. In the next scene, to the left, the lion is galloping toward the king. It then leaps into the air, but the king triumphs over it.
- On the middle register, we see another arena scene. A man on horseback seems to be provoking an inactive lion on the ground. To his left, a figure who may be the king has resorted to his own provocation of the lion—he grabs its tail and twists!
- At the bottom, we see the religious rite that concludes the lion hunt. This scene tells us that the lion hunt is not just sport; it has much more importance than that.
 - The king, Ashurbanipal, is shown here, pouring libations of wine from a cup over the bodies of four dead lions. Behind him are his courtiers and horses.
 - In front is an altar with offerings of food and incense. Musicians play stringed instruments as Ashurbanipal dedicates his hunting bow to the goddess Ishtar.
- Other reliefs show more lion hunts and dramatic confrontations of king and animal. The king is impassive—not as interesting as the dramatically dying beasts, which are quite varied in their expressions of agony and suffering. The artists seem to have been

excellent observers of nature, seeking to impart a meticulously lifelike record of the emotional and physical suffering of the lions.

- Depictions of the lion hunt showed a high level of artistic skill in the Assyrian court and demonstrated that the king restored order to the world. The chaotic and destructive world of the wild steppes, of nature unleashed, had to be kept at bay by the divine forces of the king.

Suggested Reading

Collins, *Assyrian Palace Sculptures*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does a lion hunt fit in with notions of kingship in Assyria and elsewhere?
2. What kind of impression do you think these reliefs made on the different people who might have viewed them?

“Queen of the Night”—Babylonian Goddess

Lecture 9

The “Queen of the Night” relief is a fascinating and beautiful masterpiece of Old Babylonian art, from the early 2nd millennium B.C., with both mystery and quite a history. For 50 years, rumors about its authenticity and age swirled among scholars. It is a curious mixture of the erotic and the chilling, and it is undoubtedly mesmerizing and beautifully shaped—a testament to Old Babylonian artistic skill. In this lecture, we will examine this mysterious goddess in detail and try to determine her identity. Is she Ishtar, the sister of Ishtar, or another goddess from the underworld?

Old Babylonian Period

- The Old Babylonian period in Mesopotamia (1850–1750 B.C.) was a time of intense change and instability, with shifting power between city-states in the Near East and the Mediterranean world. Conquest and movement, trade and war were unrelenting, and one of the most significant players was Babylon.
- The most powerful and renowned king of the new dynasty centered in Babylon was Hammurabi (r. 1792–1750 B.C.). He was famous for his law code and the stela that presented it in written form. On the stela, Hammurabi is shown standing in adoration before a seated Shamash, the Mesopotamian sun god, who holds a rod and a ring for measuring out justice.
 - This kind of scene, known as a presentation scene, shows that Hammurabi, unlike King Naram-Sin, is not claiming divinity. He raises his right hand to his mouth in respect or adoration.
 - In this depiction, Hammurabi is very rounded, a bit static, and in high relief. He wears a cap associated with Mesopotamian kingship, while Shamash wears the multiple-horned crown of divinity. This is the same kind of crown worn by the “Queen of the Night,” who also holds the same rod and ring in her relief as Shamash.

Description of the Relief

- The plaque known as the “Queen of the Night” relief is one of the rarest of rare art objects: an actual cult image of a goddess who was worshiped in Mesopotamia. Statues of the gods that were placed in temples were probably made of expensive materials, such as gold; unfortunately, this precious metal would have been melted down over the centuries for other uses.
- The relief appears to be a terra-cotta mold-made plaque. Originally, it would have been covered with bright paint. The plaque is 20 by 15 inches and not very deep, but it is sculpted in the high, rounded relief that was typical of the Old Babylonian period.
- It depicts a voluptuous, nude woman who is represented frontally and almost completely symmetrically. She stands on two smallish lions, and two rather large owls are placed on either side of the lions. Usually in Mesopotamia, with this kind of cult object, the gods would be shown frontally and in a static and symmetrical position. They would be easily identified by their accompanying emblems, tools, and animals.
- We know that we are dealing with a major goddess because she wears a multiple-crowned horn. She has a plump, rounded face, and her eyes are emphasized by joined eyebrows. She stands with both elbows out, displaying two symbols of the rod and ring in each hand. Despite her nudity, she is well-coifed and bejeweled.
- The body of the goddess is naturalistically modeled. She has high breasts, rounded but slim arms, and a small waist. She is curvaceous and appealing but not muscular, as Naram-Sin was. Beneath the knees, the goddess ceases to be entirely human. She has a dew claw on the side of each calf, and her feet are those of a raptorial bird. She has talons with three toes on each foot and scale-like skin.
- This goddess seems to smile benignly in spite of these menacing attributes, but her downturned wings may associate her with the netherworld. These wings are carefully incised with a scale-like

pattern on the upper part of the wing, and longer flight feathers have been carved in relief in two layers on each side. These were once painted black and red.

- The goddess stands on the backs of her two addorsed (back to back) lions, which look rather friendly. Their closed muzzles are different from what we encounter elsewhere in Mesopotamian lion images. The whorl of hair on the shoulder of the lion is thought to represent the distinctive mane of the Asiatic lion.
- Below the lions is a “platform” with an incised scale pattern—the Mesopotamian indication of mountains, which are the dwelling places of major gods. Two rather large and unrealistic owls stand frontally on either side of the lions. They are stiff and bear the same sort of wings and wing marks as the goddess. This representation of owls is a rare occurrence in Mesopotamian art.

Identity of the Goddess

- The black background of the relief, the nudity, the owls, and the lowered wings all give some credence to the idea that this scene takes place in the underworld. In fact, some scholars and others believed that this relief might represent the demon Lilith from the Bible. But underworld goddesses were not known to be worshiped, nor would such a figure be shown as a major horn-crowned deity with the rod and ring symbol.
- Edith Porada, an art historian and archaeologist from Columbia University, believed that this plaque could be a very unusual representation of the underworld goddess Ereshkigal. Ereshkigal was the sister of Ishtar, the goddess of love, fertility, and war. We saw Ishtar’s Sumerian forerunner, Inana, in the Uruk Vase.
 - In one of the great surviving Mesopotamian epics, “Descent of Inana [or Ishtar] to the Underworld,” Ishtar is forced to go to the underworld. There, she is required to disrobe at each gate and leave behind her jewelry. At the last step, her sister Ereshkigal takes the rod and ring symbols from her hands.

- Professor Porada believed that this was an image of Ereshkigal holding both her own rod and ring and her sister’s.
- Other scholars still believe that the “Queen of the Night” is the goddess Ishtar.
 - Inana/Ishtar was an immensely significant goddess. She was most likely a conflation of different forces and goddesses from different cities. Most of them were associated with fertility, love, sex, and war.



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- Ishtar was associated with lions and was often shown standing on lions. No other goddess was shown in this way. Ishtar was even called the “lion of heaven.” In some respects, Ishtar really is a lion goddess because she has the behavioral characteristics of a lion. The lion and lioness who hunt prey are perfect metaphors for portraying a bloodthirsty goddess of war.
- The overt sexuality of the image also points to Ishtar as the subject. She is sensuously modeled, regal, but full of sexual allure and seemingly fertile. Ishtar is specifically associated with lions for the metaphor of lion sexuality. She is like a lioness in that, according to myth, she copulates frequently and lustily with many lovers. And not all of her lovers survive their encounters with Ishtar!

Mesopotamia had a tradition of clay plaques showing Ishtar or a female frontally nude; the “Queen of the Night” relief may be part of this tradition.

- The inclusion of owls, two lions, and claws in the relief are not characteristic of Ishtar.
 - Although we don't have other examples of Ishtar with owls, which are predatory birds of the night, she is associated with other kinds of birds in other representations. She even has strange, birdlike feet in the Ishtar Vase at the Louvre.
 - It may be that Ishtar has two lions in this relief because it is a symmetrical presentation in which she is shown frontally. The rod and ring may also be repeated in the interest of symmetry. This sort of symmetry and an unusual, monstrous bird are shown in a much earlier copper relief from a Sumerian temple, from about 2500 B.C.
 - The Ishtar Vase dates to around the same time as this relief. In it, Ishtar is winged and has bird feet. There are also many cylinder seals that depict a winged Ishtar, and the nude frontality is shown on many plaques of the time.

History of the Relief

- The “Queen of the Night” plaque has had a contentious history in the last century. Because the object was not excavated, we can't say exactly where it comes from. It seems to have been bought and carried to England in private hands. It was brought to the British Museum in 1933 to be tested. After 1936, it changed hands several times, but some experts believed it to be a fake from the beginning.
- Thermoluminescence dating conducted by the British Museum proved the antiquity of the relief, putting the dates of the object's creation at sometime between 1850 and 1750 B.C. There were still doubts, however, with some identifying the relief as a pastiche (an artwork assembled from pieces of other works). The British Museum has since shown that the “Queen of the Night” is definitively one piece and couldn't have been a forgery.

- What's important to remember about this relief is that the powers of procreation, sex, and beauty were overwhelmingly important to early societies. Without sex, there would be no offspring and no survival of the family. This type of cult plaque became the object of the prayers, hopes, wishes, and dreams of the Mesopotamian worshiper.

Suggested Reading

Aruz, ed., *Art of the First Cities*.

Aruz, Benzel, and Evans, eds., *Beyond Babylon*.

Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*.

Questions to Consider

1. What characteristics of this plaque make it so compelling and unforgettable?
2. How do you think a love and fertility goddess, such as this one, relates to the images from the Paleolithic cave or to Mediterranean goddesses? Do you think she is a manifestation of the separation of sex from fertility?

Ishtar Gate and Processional Way

Lecture 10

The power and symbolism of the ancient city of Babylon have waxed and waned during several millennia, but the name has always evoked a reaction—one of either respect or revulsion. Babylon is probably the most mythologized and written about city in the ancient Near East, and the building projects of the Babylonian kings still remain among the greatest wonders of the ancient world. They combined vivid color, grandeur, and defensive function; fortunately, we still have parts of them to admire, including the Ishtar Gate and Processional Way, created by King Nebuchadnezzar.

The Ancient City of Babylon

- King Hammurabi, whom we saw in our last lecture, was the first king who brought Babylon to prominence as a center of religion and learning. The city was conquered in the succeeding centuries by various groups, including the Kassites and Neo-Assyrian kings.
- After the death of King Ashurbanipal of Assyria (famous for his lion hunt reliefs), King Nabopolassar (r. 625–605 B.C.) restored the city to its splendor. His son Nebuchadnezzar (r. 604–562 B.C.) created the fantastic Ishtar Gate and Processional Way.
- Babylon possessed numerous examples of the glories of the ancient world. Its defensive wall and the several gates of the city were indications of its importance and greatness.
 - The city was surrounded by double walls, the outer one made of baked brick and the inner one of sun-dried mudbrick, with rubble between them. The walls had towers for observation at regular intervals and magnificent gates covered in bronze.
 - The city was divided in two by the Euphrates River, and the river and moats were controlled by an extensive system of gratings and canals.

Babylonian New Year Festival

- One of Babylon's main religious festivals was the New Year ceremony, celebrated at the spring equinox and the barley harvest. This festival was called Akitu and was centered on the cult of Marduk, the city god.
- The Akitu rites involved a sacred procession, in which the images of the gods were carried through the city and its gates to a temple just outside the city.
- The New Year's rites also involved the humiliation of the king before Marduk; he was slapped and briefly stripped of his insignia of office! This reminded the king of his dependence on the good graces of the god. The purpose of the ceremony was to keep the ruler humble and pious and to please Marduk with the king's tears. It was a moment of atonement for sins and acknowledgment of the great power of Marduk for the whole city.
- The Processional Way and the gates of Babylon were built with such splendor and grandeur to accommodate this extremely important New Year procession. The Ishtar Gate, through which the New Year ceremony proceeded, was the main gate and the most spectacular of all the eight or so gates of the city.

The Lions of the Processional Way

- This Ishtar Gate and the Processional Way are both impressive works of architecture and engineering in terms of sheer size and effort. But it's the overall impression of towering walls and gates with bright colors and relief sculpture made of glazed bricks that raises the fortification to the level of artistic masterpiece.
- The Ishtar Gate was made of baked mudbrick and was, according to some scholars, 12 meters (40 feet) high. The Processional Way was lined with 120 lions in relief, made of molded and glazed brick and brightly colored. Today, museums around the world have pieces of the Ishtar Gate and Processional Way.

- Each of the individual lions from the Processional Way is about 1.05 meters high. They are male, striding with their mouths open; their teeth look formidable, and they seem to be roaring or snarling. In Babylonian, the name of the street along which they marched was Aibur-shabu, meaning “the enemy shall never pass.” The hostile demeanor of the lions was meant to be an intimidating deterrent to attacks.



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- The lions were mass-produced, composed of scores of molded bricks. Multiple bricks were created from many individual molds for different parts of the lion.

The Pergamon Museum in Berlin has a reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate and the Processional Way that incorporates the original bricks.

These were fired, glazed in appropriate colors, and fired again.

- The background bricks were all an intense lapis blue, the body of the lion was white, and the manes were yellow or red, although some have faded to green. The belly of each beast is partly covered by the mane's reddish or yellowish hair. The lion's long tail, with a tuft at the end, curves elegantly, echoing the lion's back leg.
- The lions are robustly modeled, and their muscular bodies exude power and strength. The lion was a symbol of the goddess of love and war, Ishtar. It was likely meant to invoke the presence of the warlike Ishtar, as well as the ferocity and strength of the lion itself.

- Because real lions are extremely territorial and intimidating, lion gates were often used in the ancient world. Such gates conveyed the message that the citizens were ready to stand their ground and fight to protect the city. Examples include the famous Lion Gate at Boğazköy, Turkey; a gate to the capital city of the Hittites (c. 1400 B.C.); and the later Lion Gate from Mycenae (c. 1300 B.C.).
- The meaning of the lions on the Processional Way is quite different from that of the Assyrian lion hunt reliefs. The Assyrian king was seeking to make a statement about keeping the wild at bay by killing lions and protecting his populace. The Babylonian lion depictions serve to intimidate enemies or allies, glorify the ruler, invoke the warlike aspects of Ishtar, and move the procession visually toward the gate.

The Ishtar Gate

- According to Nebuchadnezzar, he put in place “mighty bronze colossi of bulls and dragons” to guard the gate. They are long gone, but the gate still exists, flanked by two huge towers. It’s entirely composed of baked, glazed brick. Under the latest gate are the remains of earlier unglazed gates just like it.
- The images of two creatures are repeated across the gates; we also see a series of rosettes lining the bottom of the gate and the archway itself. These are the same rosettes we saw from 2,000 years earlier in the “Ram Caught in a Thicket,” representing Ishtar.
- The bulls on the gate are important symbols that were used for thousands of years in Mesopotamia. The wild bull symbolized male vigor and potency, the king, and the storm god, Adad. The bull lent its horns as the ultimate symbol of divinity.
 - Usually, the kind of bull depicted in Mesopotamian art is thought to be the wild aurochs, a much larger and fiercer animal than domesticated cattle. It had lyre-shaped horns that projected forward. Aurochs became extinct in the 17th century A.D., but it’s thought that they gave rise to our domestic cattle.

- The bulls depicted on the gate are strong and well-muscled. They stride forward with horns frontward and heads slightly lowered, almost as if alert and ready to charge. Although the entire background of the gate is the same brilliant blue as the Processional Way, the bull is yellow, with a flowing bluish mane that continues in a stripe down its back. It has a determined stride, just like the lion.
- The other animal depicted on the gate is the snake-dragon, or *mushushu*. This was the symbol of the chief Babylonian god, Marduk. The name means “furious snake.” This strange animal was known for at least 2,000 years before it appeared on the gates of Babylon.
 - The snake-dragon on the Ishtar Gate is a composite of all the dangerous and scary parts of other important animals: the head of a horned viper, forelegs of a lion, rear legs of a raptorial bird, and sometimes a scorpion tail. It was meant to be magically protective. It used all its most powerful and dangerous qualities in favor of the population it protected, in this case, the Babylonians.
 - The serpent head we see on the *mushushu* seems to belong to a species called *Cerastes cornutus*, a venomous horned viper found in the region even today. This snake is represented in ancient Near Eastern pottery and seals as early as 5,000 or 6,000 years ago.
 - The body of the Ishtar Gate dragon is long and scaly, and the tail twists a bit as it rises up. The tail often had the sting of a scorpion at the end, although that’s not clear in the gate’s depictions. We can, however, see the lions’ feet and the talons of a bird quite unmistakably.
 - Though it represents the god Marduk on the Ishtar Gate, the dragon also served an apotropaic function; that is, it warded off evil through intimidation. The Mesopotamians, as well as

people of other cultures, harnessed the power of dangerous or evil-seeming creatures for their own benefit.

- The animal symbols have a universal impact, quickly transmitting their messages without the need for translation in multiple languages. Yet it's also true that the animal symbols have culture-specific meanings. For instance, the snake in Mesopotamia is frequently seen as a symbol of rejuvenation and rebirth, probably because of the shedding of its skin, but in the Old Testament, the snake has an unparalleled reputation for evil.

The Conquest of Babylon

- Cyrus the Great, the founder and the ruler of the Persian Empire, conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. According to Herodotus, who recounts the fall of Babylon as unopposed, the clever Persians surprised the city by diverting the Euphrates. They then entered the city by means of the dry riverbed, which rendered all the defensive bulwarks and preparations useless.
- Cyrus entered Babylon in triumph, while the populace was celebrating the New Year's festival. Cyrus then took power from the erratic Babylonian king Nabonidus and declared himself ruler of Babylon. The Persians had sacked Nineveh in 612 B.C., so both the Assyrian and Babylonian empires were no longer under native rule.
- Alexander the Great continued this trend by conquering the Persians. But he died of a fever at age 32 in Babylon, in 323 B.C. His attempts to restore Babylon to greatness ended with his death, though the art lived on.
- As we'll see, the sights encountered by the Achaemenid Persians at Nineveh and Babylon spurred them on to greater heights in art and architecture. Determined to outdo the artistic splendors of Mesopotamia, the Persians established their own grander cities and palaces. Perhaps the most spectacular example of Achaemenid art is at the site of Persepolis, the subject of our next lecture.

Suggested Reading

Aruz, ed., *Art of the First Cities*.

Aruz, Benzel, and Evans, eds., *Beyond Babylon*.

Collins, *Assyrian Palace Sculptures*.

Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*.

Questions to Consider

1. Animals and animal hybrids, such as the snake-dragon/*mushushu*, appear in art all over the world. What makes them so effective as symbols in art? Why do you think they have universal appeal?
2. Cultures and religions around the world have traditions of pilgrimage and processions. How do you think the art at the Ishtar Gate facilitates the movement of people and the propagation of their beliefs?

The Ancient City of Persepolis

Lecture 11

In 1971, the shah of Iran hosted the most extravagant party of the 20th century at the ancient capital of Persepolis in celebration of 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy. The shah was determined to associate his rule with the beginning of the great Achaemenid Persian Empire, the dynasty initiated by Cyrus the Great. The empire created by Cyrus and his successors was the largest of all the ancient empires, swallowing up all that came before it. We've seen that the art of earlier kings began a tradition of demonstrating wealth and power. This tradition continued with the Achaemenid kings but in a style that was uniquely their own.

The Great Kings of Persia

- In our last lecture, we saw the magnificent Ishtar Gate at Babylon. The Persian king Cyrus the Great, founder of the Achaemenid Empire, walked through that gate in 539 B.C. when he celebrated his conquest of Babylon. After conquering Babylon, Cyrus declared himself “king of the world” on the famous Cyrus Cylinder, a cuneiform clay document found in Babylon.
- Cyrus conquered the Medes to the north and wrested control of all of Mesopotamia from its kings, including the empires of Assyria and Babylon. Through the conquests of Cyrus and his son Cambyses, the Persian Empire ultimately stretched from the Indus to the Nile and from Asia Minor to Armenia and Central Asia.
- A successor to Cambyses, Darius, built the capital at Persepolis, leaving us with the magnificent palaces and columns of this ceremonial center. Unfortunately, Alexander the Great burned Persepolis down when he conquered it in 330 B.C., and much of the native symbols and styles of Near Eastern art were later overtaken by the Greeks.



The size of the buildings in Persepolis, the height of the columns, and the scenes carved into the stone all served as visual propaganda to promote the Persian Empire.

- Before that time, however, the Persian kings, primarily Darius and Xerxes, created monuments to the greatness of Persia. These rulers were inspired by the Assyrian and Babylonian neighbors they had conquered and incorporated some of the visual vocabulary from those Mesopotamian empires into their constructions, including representations of the king's power, combat scenes of wild animals, and scenes of tribute bearers.

The Construction of Persepolis

- Persepolis was probably begun by Darius in about 500 B.C. Darius used stone carved by artists from Lydia and Ionia in western Turkey, as well as wood and mudbrick. Darius died in 486 B.C.; his son Xerxes (r. 485–465 B.C.) and grandson Artaxerxes (464–425 B.C.) finished the construction.
- First, a huge terrace was cut into natural rock so that the whole city was elevated. Sacred and important structures often were built up high in the ancient Near East. Some of the terraces had to be

built up, and a grand entrance consisting of a double staircase was constructed to reach the elevated platform.

- Then, a series of buildings was constructed on the platform, including gates, palaces, and halls of columns. Wooden columns of cedar and stone columns up to 20 meters high supported wooden beams and roofs of matting. All but the stone is gone.
- The columns were surmounted by huge and complex capitals: double-headed bulls, griffins, and lions. These constitute some of the greatest sculptures from Persia. Capitals and pieces of the column drums litter the landscape today.
- Elaborate relief sculptures were carved to adorn the staircases and bases of the buildings. These include scenes of tribute and of combat between lions and bulls. Much of the sculpture consisted of ideas that were taken directly from the Assyrian and Babylonian repertoire, but they were reinterpreted in the more static, elaborately decorative Achaemenid style.

The Apadana

- The Apadana was an enormous square palace with a central columned hall and four towers at the corners; it was the largest and grandest of the buildings on the terrace. There was an upper floor that was reached by staircases in the towers.
- The north and east sides of the Apadana are carved with mirrored scenes on the stairways, showing 23 delegations of tribute bearers from every corner of the empire. Another set shows Medes and Persians: guards and attendants of the empire.
 - Originally, the king would have been shown sitting on his throne and receiving the tribute, but those panels are no longer present.
 - The delegations were carved into long registers, with each separated by cypress trees and led by a Mede or a Persian holding the hand of the delegation's leader. They march toward

the king, each bearing a gift characteristic of his land and wearing identifying clothing.

- This careful attention to detail was meant to show the breadth and power of the king; it recalls a similar scene from the much earlier Standard at Ur. Of course, the size and scale of the Apadana reliefs are much grander, and the movement is more formalized and static.
- If we look closely at the reliefs, we see phenomenal sculptural “descriptions” of ancient peoples from across the empire.
 - A group from Lydia bears dishes and leads a chariot drawn by two tiny horses. They are swathed in long dress-like garments and have hats shaped like beehives.
 - After the Lydians come the Cappadocians, also from Turkey, who wear pants, cloaks, and strange forward-leaning hats. They bring a larger horse that is harnessed.
 - Later, Parthians or perhaps Bactrians bring in a Bactrian camel; they wear pants and belted tunics. Even Indians are shown, leading a donkey.
 - Note that all the human figures are shown in true profile, with their shoulders foreshortened. This is something that was not done in Egyptian art and only occasionally in Assyrian art.
 - These lines of walking but essentially static figures all work together in a sort of rhythmic symmetry. The differences in dress and tribute gifts could be jarring, but the smooth, rounded, and uniform style of carving, with lots of repetition, makes it into a cohesive and triumphant march. Similar sorts of tribute scenes were carved on other palaces.
- The clever use of the triangular space created by the angle of the staircase can be seen in combat scenes between lions and bulls. This

motif dwarfs everything else on the staircase. It harnesses the power of the lion and bull in service to the state's visual propaganda.

- This lion-bull combat motif is common in Mesopotamia, and its meaning can be construed differently and on many levels. On a purely natural level, it's clear that the lion has chased down the bull and its biting it in a bid to topple its prey. The bull is an imposing wild aurochs. It rears up, turning its horned head back toward the lion.
- Though this is a dynamic and powerful scene, the Persian sculptors lent it gravity and stasis by giving the bull two solid legs on which to rear, a steady diagonal line from the knee to the tail of the lion, and a lack of expression on the part of either beast. The feet of the ascending tribute bearers tread upon the lion and bull heads.
- The features of the animals are roundly carved and doubly outlined. It's more decorative and pleasing as ornamentation than wildlife. Yet its purpose no doubt included a demonstration of the king's majesty and aggression.
- On other levels, some believe it could be meant to symbolize an astronomical event, a New Year's festival, or a stasis in powers. The strength and might of the animals—and the empire—remains an unmistakable message.

Columns of the Apadana

- The capitals of the columns are the main evidence for the skill of the Achaemenids in three-dimensional sculpture. It seems that there were four kinds: double bulls, lions, griffins, and human-headed bulls.
- A bull capital from the Apadana is like a three-dimensional realization of the bull carved in relief on the stairway. The saddle between the two opposing bulls is meant to hold up the wooden beam that supported the roof.

- This bull bears a close resemblance to those on the Ishtar Gate in the position of the lowered head, the graceful curves of the short neck, the curly fur, and the veins on its face.
- Muscle features are made into decorative bulges that are also outlined. These capitals were originally painted, emphasizing certain features.
- The lion and griffin capitals show the same kind of treatment of details, which makes the animals more decorative than naturalistic. The planes are more smoothly carved than in the Assyrian examples of this type of creature, but the influence is clear.
- The Assyrians were the real inspiration for these sculptural reliefs and capitals, but at Persepolis, we see the influence of a whole cadre of countries: The Egyptians influenced wing and crown motifs; the fluted shafts of the columns are Greek in origin. This is truly an international amalgamation of styles and techniques.

Achaemenid Supremacy

- Though Persepolis was begun by Darius, his successors actively continued the construction. One noteworthy example of later construction is a doorway from the Hall of 100 Columns. Here, we find the figure of a king (perhaps Xerxes), sitting on his throne.
 - Above the king hovers a winged disc of the Achaemenid god Ahura Mazdā, looking rather Egyptian with its feathers. A canopy consisting of files of bulls and lions shields him from the sun.
 - Below the canopy and throne is an enormous stool with lion paws that holds the throne. Rows of men support the stool with arms upraised. These men represent the different groups ruled by the Persians: the Elamites, Armenians, Lydians, and so on. What a dramatic and effective demonstration of the reach of Persian power!
- We can observe a similar example of supremacy over conquered peoples from the Achaemenid Empire at the site of Bisitūn.

This scene, carved 300 feet high into a rock cliff, is a classic representation of a king's victory and control.

- The Bīsītūn relief was commissioned by Darius the Great after 522 B.C. It was meant to celebrate his victories over a usurper to the throne and over rebellious kings in his empire.
- Darius is shown trampling his enemy underfoot. The conquering king has the same stance in the Akkadian Victory Stela of Naram-Sin, created 2,000 years earlier.
- Another sign of Darius's triumphal domination is the fact that he faces a file of enemy prisoners who are tied together at the neck by a rope. These are the nine rebellious kings Darius conquered. They are each labeled by their countries and called "liar-kings"!
- Note the shorthand for depicting the submission of enemy peoples: In this work and others from different times and locations, they are shown as smaller, and their hands and necks are bound.
- The famous army of the Ten Thousand Immortals made the victories of the Persian kings possible. In a composition depicting the guards at Persepolis, the repetition and standardization gave the sense of stability that the Persian Empire wished to convey.

Suggested Reading

Curtis and Tallis, *Forgotten Empire*.

Questions to Consider

1. How did the Achaemenid Empire of Persia take Mesopotamian models for artwork and architecture and change them to fit the Persians' own purposes and style?
2. What kind of messages did the Achaemenid Empire propagate through its architecture and sculpture?

Palette of Narmer—The Conquering King

Lecture 12

As we have seen, the role of the king as both a provider and protector for his people seems to be almost universal in ancient cultures. Whether a king was warlike or not certainly varied, but his hold on power depended on his ability to demonstrate strength. And there was no culture as consistent in providing the art and ideology for the underpinnings of kingship as Egypt. The Palette of Narmer, a stone carving, is one of the first masterpieces created in Egypt. As we will see in this lecture, this object glorifies the king and helped build the unwavering ideology of kingship in Egypt for the next 3,000 years.

Our Earliest Historical Document?

- The Narmer Palette is piece of dark gray stone—siltstone—measuring 63 centimeters high and 42 centimeters wide, carved in low relief on both sides, and polished. It has the shape of a shield. It dates to around 3100 B.C., a similar timeframe to the Uruk Vase from Mesopotamia.
- The palette was excavated at Hierakonpolis in a temple offering deposit. It is one of a series of similarly shaped objects from that site and elsewhere in Egypt. They were formed in the shape of cosmetic palettes meant to grind eye makeup, but this and others are ritual palettes, perhaps meant to grind eye powder for images of the gods.
- The palette shows the king, identified as Narmer by the hieroglyphs at the top, in battle on one side and celebrating his victory on the other. On one side, the king wears the white crown of Upper Egypt, and on the other, the red crown of Lower Egypt. The enemy appears to be a representative of a people from the north.
- The palette may be documenting the beginning and the unification of the Egyptian state, perhaps by the conquest of the south over the



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Duality was an important facet of the Egyptian worldview, undoubtedly related to the definite demarcation of arable land versus desert caused by the flooding of the Nile.

north. Many scholars now think it shows a metaphorical battle for unity of north and south Egypt, while others, especially in the past, saw it more literally, as an actual act or series of battles.

Duality in Egypt

- Whether metaphor or real, the visual symbolism and message set forth by the Narmer Palette were important for Egypt as a state for the next 3,000 years. The state of Egypt was seen, even from this early time, as a union of what was called “the Two Lands, the Red Land and the Black Land, the North and the South, Upper and Lower Egypt.”
- This Egyptian worldview shows that duality was an important facet of Egyptian life, religion, and art. It’s undoubtedly related to the geographic location of the Egyptians, which was unique

in the world. Unlike the south-flowing, meandering, unreliable Mesopotamian rivers, Egypt has the reliable and straight Nile River, flowing north from Sudan.

- The Nile floods at regular intervals, providing a layer of rich silt, which made the land productive to farm. But the black silt from the flooding covers only a thin strip along the banks of the Nile; beyond that is the desert.
- Another difference between Mesopotamia and Egypt is the steadiness of the sun, along with little or no rain. The sun is, thus, a major factor in Egyptian religion. Mesopotamia, in contrast, had quite variable and less predictable weather and landscape, hence a preponderance of storm and weather gods.
- On the most basic level, Egyptian society made a clear demarcation between domestic and wild lands, between order and chaos, and between native and foreign enemies.
- With Egyptian society based on the predictability of nature, the Egyptians could also maintain one of the most stable traditions in art, religion, and culture ever known. This is quite contrary to the many different strains in Mesopotamia and the rest of the Near East!
- Additionally, people in Egypt could be easily united by the Nile's spine and its north-south axis, while Mesopotamia was a crossroads of trade, cultures, and conflict. Scarce and unpredictable resources in a desert landscape provoked movement and fighting in both regions.
- The king was central to the Egyptian worldview. He was the uniter of two lands, a bulwark against chaos, a hero who maintained order and interceded with the gods, and indeed, the holder of a divine office.
 - The king was associated with the falcon god Horus when he was alive and with the underworld god Osiris after he died and became fully divine.

- Some of these aspects of kingship are represented on the Narmer Palette, created at a time when kings were just beginning to establish a definite role.

The King Smiting an Enemy

- On the smiting side, the field of the palette is divided into three sections.
 - The middle section forms the ground line for the largest figure, the king. He takes up the most space and is unmistakably the most important person depicted. His height is exaggerated by the white crown of Upper Egypt that he wears.
 - Directly above Narmer's crown is his name, written in hieroglyphs. The small box with a pattern on the bottom represents the *serekh*, or palace enclosure, which contains the king's Horus name. His name is flanked by two frontal cow faces with long horns and ears that project to the sides; these represent the sky goddess.
 - The line below demarcates this region as the sky. This is the first instance of artwork showing the characteristic Egyptian use of registers to ground figures and separate scenes.
- Narmer himself has some stylistic attributes that became standard in Egyptian art.
 - He is shown in a pose that became iconic for victory: smiting a kneeling enemy. The king grasps a lock of his enemy's hair with his left hand while raising the mace to strike him.
 - Narmer wears not only a crown but also a false beard, something associated with kingship from this point forward. He has on a kilt and an animal's tail.
 - His figure is shown in what became the standard canon for Egyptian depictions of people. The face is in profile, but the eye is shown as if it were frontal. The shoulders are depicted by

a frontal view, but below the waist, the figure is in profile. Both the feet are the same, with the instep and the big toe showing.

- Note that Narmer's musculature is well defined and his legs are rather long. He strides in the same wide stance of dominance that we saw in the Stela of Naram-Sin.
- The carving above the victim—a clump of land out of which six papyrus flowers sprout—seems to identify him with the Delta people. The Horus falcon, signifying the king, grasps a rope connected to the enemy's nose. The message of domination is clear.
- The figure behind the king is the royal sandal bearer. Below him and trampled under his feet in the bottom register are two defeated enemies. They are naked, showing their humiliation, and in a pose that most likely signifies death.

The King Celebrating Victory

- The other side of the palette has four registers. The topmost one consists of the same motifs as the other side, although the *serekh* looks different.
- In the second register, we see the king again, but this time, he is wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt and a different kilt; he carries a mace and a flail and is preceded by his name in hieroglyphs.
 - The same royal sandal bearer follows him. In front, his retinue consists of a long-haired person wearing some sort of animal skin, walking in a more natural manner.
 - Ahead is a group of four progressively smaller standard bearers, shown completely in profile, unlike Narmer and his servants. They confront a group of 10 beheaded enemies, whom Narmer is triumphantly inspecting.
 - A boat seems to hover above the dead enemies. They may have died in battle or have been ritually executed. We are unsure about whether the scene depicts a religious ritual.

- The most prominent register shows two mythical beasts with long necks intertwined. They are being held back by leashes or ropes at the neck, pulled by two bearded men in loincloths. The round depression between the two beasts would have been used for grinding pigment on a real palette.
 - The animals look like lionesses, with muscular bodies and up-curving tails. We see this same unusual motif on an Uruk period cylinder seal from Mesopotamia. The motif is not seen in Egyptian art after this period.
 - It has been suggested that this motif was borrowed from Mesopotamia, and it definitely implies exchange and contact between Egypt and areas to the east.
 - Some scholars interpret the motif as a representation of the peaceful unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, but others view the scene as more hostile. This and similar palettes from the same period are replete with images of predators hunting prey and human battles and prisoners.
 - It's possible that the image of this mythical creature might be based on the combative behavior of male giraffes.
 - Other scholars believe that the men wielding the ropes that subjugate these mythical animals represent the king's subjugation of the forces of chaos.
- On the bottom register, we see a large, muscular bull, lowering its head as if to strike or impale someone with its horns. The bull steps on the victim of his attack, evidently a dead enemy. The bull's horns seem to break open some sort of fortification. It is obviously a symbol of the king and his strength.

The Palette as a Whole

- The amount of information and detail the artist managed to fit onto this awkwardly shaped, hard stone is striking. The story he tells is

superbly presented, and we can understand a great deal of it today, even if we aren't sure of the exact meaning of every symbol.

- The most significant aspect of this masterpiece is how brilliantly the theme of kingly power and domination is presented. Through hierarchy of scale, the king's position, and his representation in metaphors using animals and buildings, his power is conveyed. He wields military might, and his sphere of authority is demonstrated by the two crowns that imply the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt. He creates order out of chaos.
- This masterwork of relief sculpture documents not only an actual king's power but something more. It set the tone and the canons for the representation of the Egyptian king for the next 3,000 years.

Suggested Reading

Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids*.

Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt*.

Schulz and Seidel, *Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs*.

Tiradritti, ed. *Egyptian Treasures from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo*.

Questions to Consider

1. Given its unusual form and imagery, why do you think the Narmer Palette was created?
2. Can you identify the different functions of the king that are represented in this palette? How do you think these notions of kingship are carried through in succeeding dynasties?

Statue of Khafre—Rebirth of a King

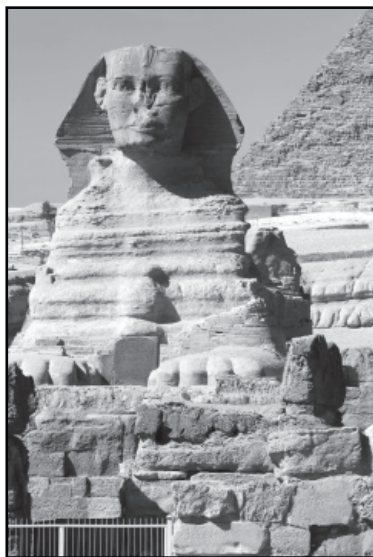
Lecture 13

Herodotus, on his journey of discovery in the 5th century B.C., characterized Lower Egypt as “the gift of the river.” He remarked that “no country possesses so many wonders.” He recounted how the ruler Chephren (r. 2555–2532 B.C.) built the second of the pyramids at Giza, next to the Great Pyramid of his predecessor and father, Cheops. It’s this early king, known to the Greeks as Chephren and to the Egyptians as Khafre, who left us some of the greatest artworks of the ancient world. In this lecture, we’ll look at the funerary statue of Khafre as an example of the artistic splendors of Egyptian civilization.

Egyptian Concepts of the Afterlife

- Every culture on earth has questions about what happens after death. Most have some answer, but the vision of an afterlife is often vague and shadowy. Egypt, in contrast, seems to have concrete and colorful ideas about life after death, and much of the art that survives from Egypt had a funerary purpose.
- Mummies and pyramids are, of course, the first things that come to mind when we think of ancient Egypt. Why did the Egyptians go to such great lengths to prepare for death? People often think of Egypt as a death-obsessed culture, but in fact, it was a death-denying culture. The Egyptians loved life and believed that by making the proper preparations for death and provisioning their tombs, they would be granted eternal life.
- The statue of Khafre is part of that preparation for death. The pharaoh prepared for immortality as a god and actually became the god Osiris, king of the underworld, in the afterlife. The pyramids show the lengths to which the Old Kingdom Egyptians were willing to go to ease this transition of the pharaoh into eternal life.

- The pyramids were the center of a religion, as well as tombs. The Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom bring to life some of the Egyptian religious beliefs. As the home for the soul of the deceased, the physical body was enormously important, thus the need for mummification and preservation.
- Egyptians also realized that not all bodies would or could continue to exist for eternity. A statue or relief made in the image of a person could serve as an alternative space inhabited by that person's soul in the afterlife.



The Sphinx at Giza, depicting the pharaoh Khafre, is the earliest colossal sculpture of a human in the world.

Description of Khafre's Statue

- The statue of Khafre shows the seated figure of the king, carved from diorite. The stone is highly polished, bringing out its natural striations and seeming to give it life. The artwork was found in 1860, buried in a pit in the valley temple connected to the pyramid of Khafre. It is about 168 centimeters, or 5.5 feet, tall.
- Khafre wears an expression of divine grace, serene and unchanging. He looks straight forward, almost as if he were looking past us. He has high cheekbones and rounded cheeks; his nose is straight and wider at the nostrils and tip. His eyes are set into his head in a very naturalistic fashion. The orbs and brow area are softly and sensitively rendered.

- Khafre projects majesty in his pose, with his head held erect and his arms at rest. He wears a distinctive headdress, called the *nemes*, a symbol of kingship. It has pleated lappets (loose folds) and extends onto his chest. His brow is crowned by a *uraeus*—the stylized upright form of a striking cobra—carved in relief, another symbol of royalty.
- The smooth, wide surface of his chest presents an ideal and youthful body—wide at the shoulders, robustly muscled, and perfect. The arms are also muscular, and the closed position of the hands, including the clenched fist, speaks of his authority.
- The throne on which Khafre sits has lion heads modeled at the level of his knees, and their feet are carved below. The lions are yet another symbol of kingship.
 - Mesopotamian ideals of kingship also included physical perfection and vigor. The king's body itself communicated messages of strength and power.
 - This emphasis on the idealized and youthful body continues in many cultures, including Greek culture and even our own.
- Viewing this statue only from the front hides the fact that Khafre's head is enfolded by the wings of the Horus falcon carved behind him. The head of the bird rises out of the stone behind Khafre's face.
 - The melding of the falcon and the king represents the idea that the king is the living Horus, the embodiment of this god of the sky, while he is on earth.
 - The enfolding wings seem to protect the king, perhaps ensuring his eternal life.
- A side view of the statue shows that the body of the lion in the throne extends to the rear, and the rear legs of the throne are those of a lion, as well. They are carved in relief, unlike the frontal view of the throne, which is sculpted.

- Carved in high relief on the space between the thrones' legs is the *sema-tawy* motif, symbolizing the union of Upper and Lower Egypt. This symbol also conveys the central importance of the king; he is both the manifestation of the united lands and the uniter.
- The statue is meant to be viewed mostly from the front and is based on the shape of a cube. Egyptian sculpture is almost always characterized by this "cubic schema." This is how the sculptors conceptualized their work as it emerged from a block of stone. The figure was meant to be static and eternal, not conveying movement.

Context of the Statue

- This work was one of a series of 23 sculptures—similar but not exactly the same—of Khafre. They were installed in the valley temple connected to his pyramid.
- The pyramid of Khafre, originally 471 feet high, contains his burial chamber. The massive bulk of the pyramid lies toward the west, in the desert realm associated with the dead. But on the eastern front of the pyramid was a pyramid temple, used for the cult of the king's *ka*, his life force or soul.
- Attached to this temple was a long causeway that led eastward to the valley temple, which was on greener land and marked the place where the sun rose: the east. It placed the king in the realm of the solar cycle, where the sun is reborn endlessly.
- Khafre's valley temple is quite grand; it is T-shaped and had a double entrance to the east. The walls there are still preserved to a height of 43 feet. A great hypostyle hall with large columns would have exhibited the 23 (now mostly lost) statues of Khafre.
- The statues were part of the cult of the dead king. They were meant to receive offerings of food, drink, and prayer. A retinue of priests was dedicated to continuing the king's cult and ensuring his immortal life. Of course, in reality, after a time, both money and memory faded, and the temples were more or less abandoned.

The Great Sphinx

- What remains of Khafre's mortuary art is impressive, including the Great Sphinx, a wonder of the ancient world. The Sphinx is 66 feet high and 240 feet long and is thought to be from Khafre's reign.
- The temple in front of the Sphinx has a double entrance and center court, just like Khafre's valley temple. There is a niche at the eastern end of the temple that is aligned with both the Sphinx and the setting of the sun at the equinoxes.
 - Sphinxes seem to be a brilliant Egyptian invention; they are copied in art all over the ancient Near East and still have resonance today. The Egyptian form cleverly masks the awkward transition of the lion's body to the human head, either with a mane or a *nemes*.
 - The choice of the lion for the colossal depiction of the king captures and uses the lion's regal demeanor and power as the king of beasts. The lion, a fierce and brave predator, is also one of the most territorial of beasts. His roaring at dawn and dusk made him a messenger of the sun's passage. Thus, a guarding, solar-linked animal makes sense on a visceral level in this location.

King Menkaure

- After Khafre's death, the third and smallest of the Great Pyramids was built by his son, Menkaure. It's possible that Menkaure died during the building of his pyramid, because it remained unfinished, and his valley temple and other structures were finished in mudbrick, not stone.
- A colossal alabaster statue excavated from the valley temple of Menkaure seems to have been the sole cult image of this king. Note that his pose, his muscularity, and even his headgear differ very little from his predecessor's.
- A fabulously carved, forceful portrayal of King Menkaure and his queen makes a good comparison with the statue of his grandfather,

showing us the development of some new trends while remaining in the tradition of Egyptian depictions of the king.

- This statue of the pair of royals fulfills every demand of Egyptian mortuary sculpture: It is eternal, ideal, timeless, and grand. It is also, however, unfinished. The high gloss of the polished faces segues into rough-hewn, unpolished feet and base.
- The faces have all the qualities of Khafre's: idealized, no emotion, a serene gaze, and finely modeled features.
- The king wears the same identifying paraphernalia as his grandfather and is muscular, youthful, and vigorous.
- His queen is similar; she is slim, young, and shapely, representing the ideal of the perfectly feminine.
- Such sculptures are not only masterpieces of ancient art, but they also played an important role in promoting the religious ideology of the state. They were cult objects, the focus of offerings, and they housed the spirit of the dead king.
 - They also placed the dead king in the center of the world, positioned as a divine being living for eternity. The king is likened to the sun god and the solar cycle of renewal in the east-west axis of his pyramid/temple complex.
 - His sculpture is inscribed with insignia that promote his central role in uniting the state of Egypt. And he is protected by, and identified with, the sky god Horus.
 - The Pyramid Texts stress the role of the king as the source of the wealth and abundance of his people, who hoped to join him in the afterlife. The cult of the king was central to every person's chances for having a proper eternal life in the hereafter. Life could continue after death, without hunger, thirst, or discomfort, if the proper provisions had been made and the gods were honored.

Suggested Reading

Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids*.

Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt*.

Schulz and Seidel, *Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs*.

Tiradritti, ed. *Egyptian Treasures from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo*.

Questions to Consider

1. Judging from the statue of Khafre, what would you say are the most important visual messages that the artist, king, and state wanted to get across?
2. How could such a sculpture serve both the functions of resurrection for the king and as a reminder of his life?

Tutankhamun's Mask

Lecture 14

In 1922, the archaeologist Howard Carter and a group of assembled dignitaries opened the sealed door to a tomb Carter had discovered in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. Wondrous riches awaited them, and they could hardly believe their good fortune in discovering what is now known to be the only tomb of a pharaoh that had remained intact and untouched for thousands of years. The iconic mask of King Tutankhamun lay closest to the mummified remains of the king. In this lecture, we'll examine this magnificent work of art, noting just how much one object can tell us about a culture.

Description of the Mask

- The mask shows us the face of the young king Tutankhamun, around age 19 when he died. The proportions of the face are all characteristic of an elegant youth—sophisticated, delicate, and fine-boned.
 - But this youthful and healthy face is deceiving: From examinations of the mummy and its DNA, medical experts have determined that Tutankhamun may have had a cleft lip and a clubfoot and suffered from malaria.
 - The image of the ideal, youthful, and muscular king had to be conjured by the artist to fit in with 2,000 years of Egyptian tradition concerning the king.
- The mask, as well as the series of coffins in which the king was buried, is replete with symbols that emphasize his role as king. Not much had changed in this symbolism in the two millennia since the time of the Old Kingdom.
 - For instance, Tutankhamun wears the same *nemes* that signified kingship for Khafre and others. His head cloth is merged seamlessly with his face; it consists of gold inlaid with stripes of blue paste, intended to resemble lapis lazuli.

- Tut also wears the false beard that was customary for kings; it is inlaid in cloisonné with blue in a herringbone pattern outlined in gold.
- On his brow is the kingly *uraeus*, the cobra Wadjet, representing Lower Egypt, combined with the vulture Nekhbet of Upper Egypt. The combination of the two is symbolic of his domination of both lands.
- Tut also wears a broad collar that ends at each shoulder with a gold falcon head, the symbol of Horus.



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The glowing gold of Tutankhamun's mask—representing the flesh of the gods—gives no hint of the king's possible physical ills.

The Coffin

- After the mask was put on the mummy of the king, he was placed in a gold mummiform coffin, which was, in turn, placed in two more gilded-wood coffins. The shape of these coffins echoed that of Osiris, ruler of the underworld.
- The innermost coffin of gold was even more complex in its imagery and construction than the mask, whose features it repeats. Tut wears the *nemes* and the *uraeus*, though the stripes are now solid gold, not blue.

- He wears the false beard of kingship, and his arms are crossed at the bejeweled wrists on his chest. His hands hold more symbols of kingship: the *heka* scepter and the *nekhaka* flail.
- Another beautiful and graceful element of the coffin has a further symbolic meaning: The enfolding wings of the vulture Nekhbet and the cobra Wadjet in a bird's body seem to protect the king in death, and they hold the protective *shen* sign in their claws.
- Much of the gold coffin is hammered and chased (incised) with designs of wings, scales, stripes, and other shapes. This extraordinary coffin of solid gold weighs 250 pounds!
 - The use of such large quantities of gold is similar to what we saw in the Royal Cemetery at Ur some 1,000 years earlier. Presumably, the great kings who ruled before Tut were buried in even greater splendor, with even richer and more elaborate grave goods, but their graves were looted long ago.
 - The emphasis on power and eternal life was inherently part of a king's hold on his people. The funerary rites and burials involving such a great show of wealth enhanced the power and glory of the office of the king.

The Boy King and His Family

- Tutankhamun was not a king of great importance; he was a boy who ruled for only 9 or 10 years in the New Kingdom, from the time he was about 9 years old. His early and untimely death had practically erased his existence from Egyptian memory, which is probably the reason his tomb had not been looted.
- Tut was born in the New Kingdom (1550–1070 B.C.), the time of the greatest flowering of the Egyptian Empire. His birth name was actually Tutankhaten, reflecting the solar cult of Aten emphasized by his father, the famous so-called monotheistic or heretic king Akhenaten.

- Under Tut's grandfather, Amenhotep III, who ascended to the throne in 1390 B.C., both war and art flourished, and Egypt's empire extended from the Euphrates in Syria to the Nile's fourth cataract in Nubia, where the gold was mined.
- Amenhotep IV, Tut's father and the son of Amenhotep III, changed his name to Akhenaten in the fifth year of his reign. He is depicted as the strange and seemingly distorted figure who started a new religious movement, Atenism, and founded a new capital, Akhetaten.
 - Akhenaten replaced the earlier gods, Amun chief among them, with worship of the sun disk, called the Aten. The cults and the priesthood of Amun were attacked and replaced.
 - Akhenaten started the Armana style in art to express his new beliefs, which embodied the notion that he was the child and the personification of the sun on earth. This style is quite mannered and exaggerated in many ways, although fluid and personal; it makes use of an elongated, elegant, and sinuous line.
 - Some of the subject matter of the art was also new. It emphasized more intimate and immediate scenes of the family of the pharaoh. Animals, especially horses, along with boats and women of the royal court, appear frequently.
- Nefertiti, Akhenaten's wife, seems to have wielded great power. She is shown with a new crown and engaged in kingly activities, such as smiting an enemy.
- Interestingly, Akhenaten had himself depicted with feminized and strangely distorted features. It's likely that this depiction was a religious statement: Akhenaten wanted to have the characteristics of both male and female to express his centrality in the religion.
- Tut seems not to have been the son of Akhenaten by Nefertiti or by his secondary wife; DNA analysis has revealed him as the son

of Akhenaten and his own full sister. Brother-sister incest was the Egyptian means of keeping the royal bloodline intact, but it had serious genetic repercussions for Tut and others.

- Tut was married to his half-sister, and he was buried with two fetuses, which DNA tests have suggested were his children. They were not brought to term and perhaps couldn't be because of genetic defects. Sadly, Tut's own early demise might have been linked to those weaknesses attributed to incest.
- Tut ruled only 10 years, and in that time, older officials were most likely making the real decisions. One of those decisions was to return to the religion of Amun. The city of Akhetaten was abandoned, and the royals returned to their earlier residence in Memphis.

Other Contents of Tut's Tomb

- The first thing Carter glimpsed when the tomb was opened in 1922 was the golden shrine that held the sarcophagus and nested coffins of the king. This shrine was immense: 17 by 11 feet and 9 feet high. It filled the burial chamber completely. When the doors of the shrine were thrown open, a second gilt-wood shrine was found within and then a third and a fourth!
- Charming scenes of hunting trips and boating excursions were incised into the gold of a smaller shrine found in the antechamber. These scenes seem to capture some of the love and intimacy between Tut and his wife.
- One of the most famous and masterful works from the tomb is the throne of Tutankhamun. It is wood covered with gold leaf and set with semiprecious stones and colored glass. It shows some scenes similar to the shrines, recalling the height of the Amarna style.
 - For example, we see the Amarna stylistic influence in the soft flesh of Tut: His rounded belly rests on his kilt; his neck is long and thin; and his elongated fingers are elegant and stylized. In

another reference to his father's religion, the sun disk, or Aten, above the pair reaches its rays down to them.

- The throne bears distinctly royal insignia, including the lion heads at the ends of the seat, the lion paws for feet, and the outstretched wings of a serpent forming the arms.
- Another noteworthy object found in the tomb was a painted wooden chest with scenes extolling the king's virtues in warfare. He battles the Nubians, enemies from the south, on one side, and the Syrians, from the north, on the other.
- Other objects in the tomb include the canopic chest of Tut, made of alabaster. This is where the eviscerated organs were embalmed and stored, in four separate jars.
 - Each jar bore an image of the head of the king, carved in white alabaster with painted accents.
 - The jars were set in an alabaster chest, which in turn was put inside a large gilt shrine. Gilt goddesses guarded the contents of the shrine.
- Thousands of spectacular objects were found in Tut's tomb, including fantastic jewels on the body of the king, pieces of furniture, and a statue of the king on the back of a walking leopard, which may be conducting the king into the underworld.
- One of the most famous animals associated with the tomb was the jackal Anubis. He is a funerary god who guides the corpse through the mummification process, then on to the afterworld.
- Finally, a series of painted scenes helps us understand Tut's reign and funerary customs of the time. We see the king standing before the goddess Hathor; behind him is Anubis, who guides him to the underworld and renewal.

- Tut's successor, Ay, is depicted, wearing the leopard skin that signifies a priest. He performs the "opening of the mouth" ritual to reanimate the mummy.
- A final grouping shows Tut embracing the welcoming underworld god Osiris. The figure behind Tut is his *ka*, or life force.
- The dead king in these depictions looks like his mummy mask. His remarkably consistent appearance is a sign of the careful and controlled output of the workshop of royal artists.

Suggested Reading

Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids*.

Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt*.

Schulz and Seidel, *Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs*.

Tiradritti, ed. *Egyptian Treasures from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why did the Egyptians use gold for the mask and inner coffins of the kings? How does the style of the mask compare to the Amarna style's approaches to art for the pharaoh?
2. What other riches might more major pharaohs than Tutankhamun have been buried with? How do you think the tombs were robbed and by whom?

Tomb Painting of Nefertari

Lecture 15

We owe our knowledge of the Egyptians—and most of the artworks we have retrieved from their civilization—to the Egyptian preoccupation with life after death. The concern of every Egyptian king or noble as soon as he came to power or accumulated enough wealth was to begin his preparation for the afterlife. The building of temples recorded the ruler's deeds and piety, but building his tomb assured him everlasting life. We'll look at these tombs—the mysterious and beautifully decorated “homes for eternity”—in this lecture.

Tombs of the New Kingdom

- The New Kingdom (1550–1070 B.C.) in Egypt began with the expulsion of a foreign people, the Hyksos, along with the ascension of King Ahmose in 1550 B.C. This era was the time of the greatest might and expansion of the Egyptian Empire. The Egyptian capital was firmly established at Thebes in Upper Egypt.
- A remote area of the western desert, where Ra, the sun god, set and began his solemn journey through the underworld, was selected as the burial area for royalty. This was considered the realm of Osiris, lord of the underworld, and Anubis, the jackal god of embalming. Tombs for the kings were first carved high into the rock walls of the cliff formed by the course of an ancient river. They later spread to lower areas.
- The tombs became more complex with time. Plans were carefully drawn and executed by master architects and craftsmen, and each room was painstakingly decorated according to religious formulas. On the whole, they were devoted to the journey and arrival of the deceased into the afterlife, where immortality was achieved. Passages from magical texts, such as the Book of the Dead, were written on the walls and copiously illustrated.

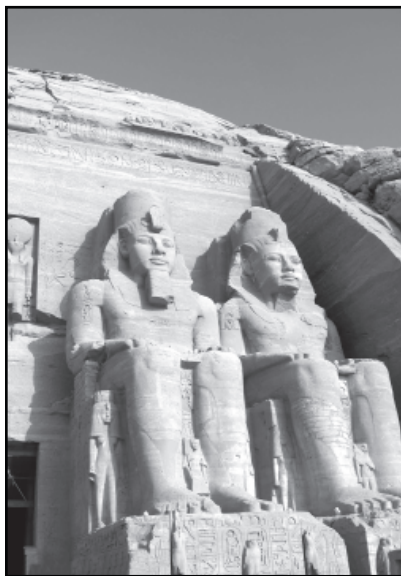
- The religious concerns of this time changed significantly from the Old Kingdom and the time of the pyramids, when the burial chambers of kings had been unadorned. By the time of the New Kingdom, royal tomb decoration was devoted to a serious religious event: the meeting with various gods, especially Osiris and Anubis, who equipped the deceased for the perilous journey to the afterlife.

Valley of the Kings

- The Valley of the Kings was in a remote outpost to the west of the Nile where, it was thought, the tombs could be guarded against robbers. A king's body was buried in his tomb in the valley, but his mortuary cult, where the religious rites were enacted, was located closer to the Nile.
- Seti I (r. 1306–1290 B.C.), the father of Ramesses the Great and father-in-law of Nefertari, had the most complete and elaborate tomb in the valley. The essential elements of royal tombs of this era included a shaft or stairway down into the rock, a descending corridor that might have rooms on either side of it, an antechamber, and the final burial chamber, into which the king's sarcophagus would be placed.
- Making the tomb required men to excavate the limestone, plasterers, draftsmen to sketch out the scenes to be painted, relief carvers, and painters. They might all be working at once on different parts of the tomb to complete it under time pressures.
- Seti's tomb has magnificent paintings of the stars and constellations in the burial chamber. Elsewhere, it contains depictions of passages from the Book of Amduat, the Book of Gates, and other texts. These were all underworld books—essentially magic spells—that helped the king survive the dangerous journey toward his resurrection and eternal life.

Queen Nefertari

- The extraordinary tomb of Queen Nefertari was opened in 1904 and began to suffer the effects of tourism and open air. It has been closed and reopened intermittently since that time, and in the 1980s and 1990s, it was extensively conserved by the Getty Conservation Institute and the Egyptian Antiquities Organization.
- Nefertari was an unusual queen, the principal wife and great favorite of Ramesses II, one of the most powerful kings to rule Egypt. Both king and queen were immortalized on many monuments aboveground, including the Temple of Abu Simbel at Aswān.
- Nefertari is shown on the main façade of this temple and had her own temple, too: the Queen's Temple at Abu Simbel. She is shown on the same colossal scale as her husband. The depictions in her tomb are concerned solely with her transition into the next life. The tortuous path she needed to take to get there was outlined—and magically assisted by—the decorations on its walls.



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Ramesses II built the colossal Temple of Abu Simbel to impress the Nubians after his victory at the Battle of Kadesh.

A Tour of Nefertari's Tomb

- Visitors enter the tomb and descend a stairway into the first chamber, where a large image of the sun disk adorns the upper lintel ceiling. This is a representation of the transit of the sun through the sky. Two birds, the forms of the goddesses Isis and

Nephthys, flank the solar disk. The sun and Nefertari descend into the tomb and the underworld.

- The tomb continues its descent with a second stairway into the antechamber. The ceilings here are striking, decorated in a gorgeous pattern of brilliant blue shimmering with yellow stars—the heavens. This chamber is quite damaged, but it illustrates passages from the Book of the Dead. Its paintings are devoted to the preservation of Nefertari's body and her meeting with deities who will ensure her place in the netherworld.
- If we continue to the east wall and the side chamber, we see Nefertari being greeted by Osiris and Anubis as she enters the underworld. Osiris has green flesh, symbolic of vegetation and, thus, renewal, and he's enclosed in a shrine. Anubis is in his own shrine, holding an ankh sign. Both are depicted on a brilliant yellow background, perhaps mimicking the sun's light.
- The vestibule has two mirror images of what is called the *djed* pillar, a very old sign of stability associated with Osiris. This one is personified by Osiris; he's shown, arms holding a crook and flail in front of him, while his head is replaced by the pillar.
- Following eastward, we see a wonderful depiction of Nefertari being led by Isis to the seated scarab-headed god Khepri on the northeast wall. Here, Nefertari appears in a typical representation for her tomb.
 - She wears a diaphanous white gown, a dark wig with three sections, a gold vulture crown, and a broad collar.
 - She is shown in classic Egyptian fashion, chest frontal and legs and head in profile, with a large frontal eye. She is strikingly beautiful.
- On the southeast wall, we see the queen being led by Horus, son of Isis. They are approaching Re-Harakhty and Hathor, who are seated along the corner. The queen wears the same garment and accessories.

- Horus has the head of a falcon and wears a composite crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. Hathor is wearing her name emblem on her head, and both she and Re-Harakhty are seated on elaborate stools with the *sema-tawy* symbol.
- Above the doorway is one of the most exquisite images of an animal in Egyptian art: the spread-winged vulture, the goddess Nekhbet, who grasps the *shen* sign for eternity in her talons.
- The goddess of truth and order, Maat, is depicted on either side of the annex in a tight red dress that exposes her breasts.
- In the annex, Nefertari offers cloth to the god Ptah on one wall. On the other, she confronts Thoth, the ibis-headed god of scribes. The queen receives a writing palette and water bowl from Thoth. Inscribed here is a quote from the Book of the Dead: “Bring me the water, the bowl, the palette and the writing case of Thoth and the secrets within them.”
- The scenes on the east wall show Nefertari with sumptuous piles of offerings to the gods Osiris and Atum, both of whom are seated. The west wall depicts the seven sacred cows and the bull of the west in two registers. They are the gods of fate. Below them are oars that will help guide Nefertari on her way. The voyage to the land of the dead was envisioned as a journey by boat across the cosmic seas.
- Nefertari must now descend a second stairway into the burial chamber, where she will confront the ordeals of her journey.
 - On each side of the stairway is the respective decoration of Upper and Lower Egypt: the cobra and vulture, the papyrus and lily.
 - With unusually thoughtful use of the space, painted on the upper section are gloriously colorful images of Nefertari making abundant offerings to three goddesses. The furthest goddess, cramped into a shrinking space, crouches with

outstretched wings that “protect” the cartouche that contains the name of the queen.

- At the bottom of the stairway is the burial chamber, which almost concludes the journey of death and resurrection. The body rested here in a sarcophagus, which is now gone, along with all the grave goods.
 - The wall on the left depicts the beginning of Nefertari’s journey through several “gates” to the underworld. These are each guarded by fierce, almost demonic beings. She holds her arms upward in a gesture of adoration before the gold and red doorway and speaks their names in order to be allowed to pass.
 - There is a niche for the canopic jars that contained the mummy’s viscera in a chest, protected by the goddess Nut.
 - On the eastern walls, the queen must pass by caverns to the land of Osiris. Each underworld cavern is guarded by a large squatting being armed with a knife. Crocodile, bull, and serpent heads adorn them.
- Finally, Nefertari reaches her destination in the underworld. The center, where her sarcophagus would be, is her place of resurrection. It’s surrounded by four columns that depict gods and priests, including a touching, delicate rendering of Hathor holding the ankh, or breath of life, to Nefertari’s nostrils.
 - On the wall that is considered to be at the ritual western point, Nefertari stands regally, with arms upheld before the gods of the underworld.
 - In front of Nefertari are the four canopic jars that hold her organs. She has arrived at her own resurrection.
 - Thus is affirmed the place of Nefertari in the “sacred land” and her eternal life. She is one with the sun god, Ra. The journey was a dangerous one, but she was successful!

- Nefertari's was one of the most elaborate, beautifully painted tombs in all of Egypt, an extraordinary testament to the power of the Egyptians' belief and their unparalleled imagination and artistry.

Suggested Reading

Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids*.

Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt*.

Schulz and Seidel, *Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs*.

Tiradritti, ed. *Egyptian Treasures from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo*.

Questions to Consider

1. The program of paintings for Nefertari's tomb is quite complex and follows a plan involving a journey, motion, and a set of challenges to reach the afterlife. (This was also true in Ishtar's descent into the underworld in Mesopotamia.) Why do you think the Egyptians saw the afterlife and resurrection in this way?
2. Egyptians devoted a considerable amount of time and wealth to preparing for the afterlife. How do you think this might have affected their daily life on earth and their economy?

Kritios Boy—Idealized Athletic Youth

Lecture 16

The Kritios Boy from Greece's Late Archaic age, about 480 B.C., marks the beginning of realism in Western art. In a period of about 50 years, Greek sculptors took a radical turn from previous traditions. For the first time, ancient artists pursued a human image that looked real and rejected the stiff, idealized forms that had been sculpted up to the 5th century B.C. These Greek artists were closely observing nature and life and trying to reproduce it as it actually appeared. This was a new concern, one that turned away from the idealized or stock forms that had served the conceptual purposes of immortality or religion or the state.

The Culture of the Greeks

- In the 5th century B.C., momentous changes were taking place in Greece and around the world. Democracy came to Athens, intellectuals posed important philosophical questions, Greece itself had new wealth and power, and philosophers and leaders became much more interested in humans than the gods.
- The Greeks were a seagoing people, and because their land was not rich in resources, trade and travel were important. They brought home goods and influences from around the Mediterranean and beyond. A system of independent city-states developed in this land of islands and harbors.
- The Greeks' "culture of competition" is reflected not just in actual warfare but in their preoccupation with athletic contests, male dominance, and state propaganda that was cloaked in the art of myth and religious traditions. They were famous for their athletic contests and idolized youthful warriors and heroism.
- Greeks had different gods from the rest of the Mediterranean world—gods who acted and looked like humans, only better. Indeed, their images of the gods, unlike those of the ancient Near

East, were fully human and without such identifying characteristics as horns, costumes, or animal traits. Rather than focusing on the afterlife and its demands for achieving immortality, Greeks focused on the realm of the living human.

- The Greek philosophy of art was also different from the art of Mesopotamia, where the focus was on the gods, expressions of piety, and state propaganda. With the Greeks, the central focus shifted from the animal and natural world to the human body itself.

The Path to Perfection in Greek Art

- Early on, the Egyptians came up with a pattern for how a monumental or life-sized human should be carved, and they didn't change that pattern much over the years. The Old Kingdom sculpture of Menkaure and his wife serves as an example.
 - Egyptians didn't create sculpture in the round; there is almost always a back slab that makes a sculpture essentially a carving in high relief.
 - Egyptian work was also not meant to show movement or the momentary states of human existence.
- The kouros in the Metropolitan Museum of Art stands in a pose very similar to the Menkaure from almost 2,000 years earlier, but this is not a relief sculpture. Unlike Menkaure, this youth has been freed from the stone completely.
 - Viewed from the side, the Metropolitan kouros looks more like an actual person; his legs and posture are slightly more relaxed and realistic, and the proportions of his body are more human and less eternal and divine than those of Menkaure.
 - The kouros is quite slender and has narrower hips and shoulders than the Egyptian norm. Unlike the Egyptians' depiction of muscles, the Greeks seem to have envisioned them as some sort of patterned overlay on a solid mass, rather than integral parts of the body.



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Kritios Boy was found in an excavation in the rubble of the Acropolis and may date to 480 B.C., perhaps before the Persian sack of Athens.

- It's interesting to note that the Egyptian misconceptions in depicting the knee and shin are echoed, to some degree, in the Greek legs. The kneecap is merely a floating geometric shape, and the ridge on the shin, which is not true to life, appears in both Egyptian and Greek examples.
- These sculptures are not at all “imitations” of nature. They seem to be experimenting with form and pattern to create an effect. They do not rely on observation from life.
- Moving forward to 540–520 B.C., we see a startling difference in the appearance of the same type of kouros sculpture. This young man, called Kroisos (Anavysos Kouros), is a grave marker of a young warrior who died in battle.
 - The kouros form has put on considerable muscle since the earlier example. The swelling, athletic mass of the thighs and

calves; the exaggerated delineation of the abdomen; and the more natural, integral qualities of the chest muscles make him seem much more real. He is far less blocky and geometric, like a collection of surface patterns, and much more like a breathing human whose muscles grow on a skeletal frame.

- The face is also better proportioned, and the muscular arms hang to the sides in an athletic manner. This is an example of an idealized, well-trained youth, and it appears far freer from its marble block than anything to date.

Description of the Kritios Boy

- The Kritios Boy was found in an excavation in the rubble of the Acropolis and may date to 480 B.C. We are not sure whether he was made before or after the Persian invasion and destruction of Athens. He is, however, the first statue we have that makes a clean and decisive break with the form of the kouros that existed to this point. Some believe that he may be a depiction of the hero Theseus.
- The pose of the Kritios Boy is much more natural than that of the Anavysos Kouros.
 - In the Kritios sculpture, we see a slight twist, a movement in axis, that mimics the actual movements of the bones to which the muscles are attached. The spine has a slight reverse-S curve.
 - It seems as if a moment in time has been captured here, rather than an eternal and rigid pose.
 - In the world of art history, this new posture is called *contrapposto*, from the Italian for “counterpoise.” This posture is a new development in life-size sculpture; it gives the viewer the sense that movement or action is imminent.
- The Kritios sculpture is entirely naked, with no attempt to mask or pull a veil of clothing over the genitals. We haven’t seen this sort of proud male nudity before in Egypt or the ancient Near East, where nakedness was more commonly associated with death, loss, and

humiliation. Confident athleticism, with no shame in male nudity, is characteristic of Greek culture.

- Earlier kouroi sported what is known as the “Archaic smile,” one occasioned by drawing up the lips. This somewhat artificial convention had been abandoned by the time of the creation of Kritios Boy; he seems more serious, more natural in his expression, and more real. This serious expression, in fact, gave rise to what is called the “severe style” in Greek sculpture.
- The Kritios Boy has fleshier, youthful cheeks and a natural nose, and unlike the earlier kouroi, his eyes were inlaid, not painted on. The inlays would have been of contrasting stone or metal. His chin is fleshy and heavier than that of the earlier sculptures, as well.
- The hair is handled quite differently too. The locks are rolled over a metal circlet to form a ring of curls, and the whole coiffure is sharply delineated from the face in a less-than-naturalistic manner. The grooved surface of the hair radiating from the top of the head aims to imitate hair more closely than the bead-like curtain of the Archaic hair, but it doesn’t entirely succeed at naturalism either.

Bronze Casting

- Some scholars postulate that the innovations we see in the depiction of the male in Kritios Boy are a result of the art of bronze casting. This was a highly developed technique and important in Greek Classical art. Unfortunately, not many large Greek bronzes survive; the valuable metal was often melted down to make weapons during wars.
- One example, an image of Zeus, gives us a sense of the possibilities inherent in the casting process, which proved far more versatile, malleable, and friendly to naturalism than stone carving. Here, we can see the full exploitation of athletic and muscular potential that we glimpsed in Kritios Boy.
- The powerful and older male, Zeus or, possibly, Poseidon, is poised to throw a thunderbolt (or trident), and the musculature appears to

be as natural as in a real person. The capture of the momentary is something new and valued in this tradition.

Classical Age Developments

- Kritios Boy, named after the sculptor who was believed to have sculpted it, stands at the beginning of the Classical tradition. He foreshadows the interest in balance and harmony that was to come in Greek sculpture.
 - Shortly, we'll see the canonization of proportion, most famously in the *Canon* of Polykleitos, as demonstrated in his sculpture of the *Doryphoros* ("Spear Bearer"), created in 450 or 440 B.C.
 - This sculpture encapsulates much of the Greek philosophy of harmony, symmetry, and proportion. The contrapposto is firmly in place, and the figure is more rhythmically balanced and poised for motion than Kritios. The attempt at naturalism is no longer tentative but sure, confident, and mature.
 - This is Classical sculpture of the male body in its prime. The quest for beauty through formula and canonic proportions seems to be surpassingly important at this time, and its development is a hallmark of Greek art.
- In many other ancient cultures, early innovators seemed to have settled on a formula or canon that worked well for their purposes, and they were usually far more conservative about change. In Egypt, for example, the formula worked well for three millennia.
- What is astonishing about the Greek developments in art is that they occurred in the space of 50 to 100 years. We see vast changes in the understanding of human anatomy and movement that go hand in hand with social changes and changes in the purpose of the art.

The "Maiden in Marble"

- In the Archaic age of Greece, a new form of the "maiden in marble," called the *kore*, developed in parallel with the *kouros*. The *kore* was

a modestly dressed, columnar sculpture. These were more studies of dress and form than the female body.

- The Peplos Kore, for example, bears more of a resemblance to Mesopotamian cylindrical sculpture than it does to its male Archaic contemporary.
- The challenge of the clothed female figure was, in some respects, greater because the drapery and cloth had to be interpreted and understood as acting on a body. It is this challenge to which the Greek artists rose and triumphed—the Classical women of the Parthenon sculptures, for instance, become studies in sinuous patterns; fleshy, lush bodies; and masterful manipulation of volume and space.

Suggested Reading

Boardman, *Greek Art*.

———, ed., *The Oxford History of Classical Art*.

Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred*.

Golden, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece*.

Herrmann and Kondoleon, *Games for the Gods*.

Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why were the Greeks among the first to seek a realistic and natural posture in life-size human sculpture, and what is it about their culture that made this goal worthwhile to them?
2. Why do you think nudity in male sculpture became customary and was used to depict heroism? It seems natural to us today, but what would ancient people contemporary with the Greek Classical artists have thought?

***Discobolus*—Motion in Sculpture**

Lecture 17

In the Classical age of Greece, the Olympic Games were a sacred event. Young men from Greek city-states—Athens, Sparta, and elsewhere—made the arduous journey to Olympia in the hopes of winning and making their mark. Though the Olympic awards were not monetary, as they are today, the winner could look forward to fame and prestige for life. In fact, the Greeks greatly admired the athletic contenders and winners of the games. What do athletes and athletic competition have to do with art? In this lecture, we look at a masterpiece that bridges these worlds and made its mark on Classical antiquity: Myron's *Discobolus*.

The Discus Thrower

- In looking at Myron's *Discobolus*, we notice immediately that the young man is shown in the midst of motion, not standing idly. We also notice that he is shown completely naked and in the most realistic manner—we can almost feel his muscles moving. This is the most realistic example of a human body we've seen so far in the ancient world, and the fact that the subject is caught in mid-motion makes it even more impressive and dramatic.
- The sculpture we know today, a life-size marble figure, is actually a Roman copy of a famous bronze original, made by the acclaimed artist Myron around 460 B.C. This copy is from about the 1st century A.D.
- The artist chose to depict a discus thrower because he is strong and powerful and because the throwing motion is striking and beautiful—the movements are a sort of masculine ballet.
 - The ancient discus was heavier than a modern one, probably about 15 pounds versus 5 pounds.
 - While standing still, the thrower could not easily lift the heavy discus with one arm while keeping his shoulders parallel to the

ground. He had to lean his left shoulder down and raise his right shoulder—the arm holding the discus. This created potential energy, something like pulling a rubber band before releasing it.

- With the discus lifted, the athlete used his legs for power. He leaned forward, with his weight on his right foot.

- From this position, the thrower could either complete a standing throw or a spinning throw, either of which was graceful and powerful.



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- What we see in this statue is the moment just before release, when kinetic energy was greatest and was about to be transferred into real energy in the discus. It's the transitory, pregnant moment, which is the most dramatic and exciting for the onlooker.

Myron's original *Discobolus* was made of bronze and was probably melted down for the value of its metal; fortunately, it was considered a masterpiece in its time, and many copies were made in marble.

Artistic Accommodations

- To increase the dramatic effect of his sculpture, Myron had to make certain accommodations. One of these is the emphasis on the increased diagonal position of the athlete—the extreme angle of the shoulders and the dramatically bent legs. These are slight exaggerations of the natural motion.

- Another accommodation is that the sculpture is carved all on one plane, as if it were a relief with all the background removed.
 - This could be the way it was conceived, as pedimental sculptures are—with their buildings as background. As we saw earlier with the Archaic kouros, the human body had been freed from the shackles of stone that encumbered Egyptian sculptures.
 - It's also possible that this accommodation was made as much for practical reasons as aesthetic. It would be easier and safer to create either bronze or marble figures by limiting them to one plane, rather than having arms and legs extending out at odd angles.
- Note, too, that a tree trunk supports the sculpture at the leg and knee. Such supports were often used in Classical stone sculpture because the stone was likely to break without it. The artist has taken pains to ensure that the tree trunk recedes into the background.
- Finally, the head is at a different angle than we would see in a real athlete engaged in this motion. In reality, the heads of the marble copies had broken off, and we are not always sure of how exactly they were placed.

Movement and Nudity in Greek Art

- As we've seen, ancient societies were more interested in art that supported the religious, political, or social aims of a ruler or state than in art that portrayed movement. Colossal or large sculptures of kings and heroes were usually still and eternal. This was especially true of images meant for temples or tombs.
- Why, then, did the Greeks become interested in showing motion? One reason is that Greek society placed a clear emphasis on competition. The beauty of the human body was appreciated as never before, and it wasn't just kings or queens who were shown as perfect but young male athletes. We saw the beginning of this trend with the Archaic kouros, which became increasingly lifelike with time.

- The Greek practice of nudity for male athletes played an important part in the artist's ability to observe and accurately portray the human body. Greek athletes routinely practiced and competed in the nude.
- Nudity was seen as ennobling and pure, rather than a sign of humiliation or defeat. Further, it allowed for disengagement from time and place; images were elevated from the mundane world.
- The admiring gaze of the onlooker was also an important part of athletic competition. Young men were admired for their taut bodies.
- Some earlier instances of nudity in art, such as on the Uruk Vase, were associated with priestly ritual; there was a religious reason for showing nakedness. In the Greek case, however, the reason for nudity was more related to aesthetics. The Greeks admired the human body and wanted to see it bared in all its glory.
- The beauty of this sculpture lies in its rhythm, balance, and proportions. Over time, the Classical Greek artists paid increasing attention to details of anatomy and motion as they tried to capture the actual appearance of the male body. There was also a movement toward defining a canon of proportions and symmetry.
 - The Greek sculptor Polykleitos, who came a little after Myron, wrote a treatise on *symmetria* (now lost), in which he expounded on commensurability of parts in art.
 - Polykleitos's *Canon* put forth a philosophy of showing balance in motions between the opposite sides of the body. One of his most famous works is the *Doryphoros* of 460 B.C. It is a spear bearer, possibly a javelin thrower, and pentathlete.
 - The beauty and harmony that Polykleitos sought is here: For instance, the straight leg of the right side balances the bent left arm and leg.

Greek Athletic Competitions

- The *Discobolus* refers to an event that was an important part of the Olympic Games and other Greek athletic competitions. The discus throw was part of the ancient pentathlon, a competition that consisted of five events: long jump, javelin and discus throw, a sprint race, and a wrestling match. The all-around athlete of the pentathlon was considered to be the finest.
- Greek athletic competitions could be dirty and corrupt. Cheating occurred, and such moves as gouging the eyes of an opponent were tolerated, especially in wrestling. Sometimes competitors even died. The important result was winning. The victors were celebrated for generations, with their statues erected on the sites of the games.
- The original Olympic Games were established in Greece, according to tradition, in 776 B.C. The pentathlon began in probably 708 B.C. With the advent of Christianity, these “pagan” games were stopped, but they were revived in the 1890s.
 - Germany hosted the Olympics in 1936, and in 1938, Hitler requested that one of the copies of Myron’s *Discobolus* be sent to Germany, supposedly as a “gift.” It was returned to Rome after the war.
 - Obviously, this artwork represented to Hitler some of the ideas about the *Übermensch*—superhuman perfection and strength. Ironically, the statue came from the cradle of democracy but was used as propaganda for an evil dictatorship.
- For the Greeks, competition, beauty, and the mind were supreme. There were four major “crown” games or Panhellenic festivals in different cities: the Pythian, Isthmian, Nemean, and the best known and most prestigious, the Olympic games.
 - Athletic competition served as a means to train the male youth of their city-states for warfare and to improve their characters and minds. Athletic contests, particularly the Greek games, also allowed spectators to admire the beauty of the contestants. Rhythm and grace were important in the events.

- Above all, though, Greek games served the gods. They were, unlike the modern games, essentially religious rituals. They involved animal sacrifice, mortification of the flesh, and great efforts for the participants. At the games, oxen and other animals were sacrificed to honor Zeus and other gods, prayers were made, and music was played during and between athletic events.
- Participants engaged in other kinds of ritual sacrifice, fasting, sexual abstinence, and 30 days of sequestration as part of the preparation for some of the games. Greek athletes would even leave votive gifts of their equipment, such as jumping weights or a discus.
- The games were initially rooted in death and worship, held as funeral games. They were also rooted in myth, particularly that of Herakles, the semi-divine son of Zeus who served as a bridge between the gods of Olympus and the human world.
 - Herakles was able to act in defense of human society by performing great feats, such as strangling the dangerous Nemean lion with his bare hands.
 - We can also see in Herakles an echo of the semi-divine Gilgamesh from Mesopotamia, who civilizes beasts and protects his cities in feats that no mortal could achieve.
 - The notion of a hero who achieves fame and glory by defeating beasts and enemies is apparently universal. These heroes also served an important civic function: They were a civilizing force for their cultures.
- The Greeks emphasized a different sort of education for wealthy young men than was previously known in the ancient world. The *gymnasion*, derived from the Greek word for “naked,” was the name for the school elite young men attended in order to develop their minds and bodies and enter manhood. U.S. high schools and colleges today incorporate sports as part of their educational missions.

- Today, sport stars are rewarded with money, fame, and glory. They become admired as role models and become celebrities for their deeds and appearance. This was true in ancient times, as well; indeed, the athletes' deeds are recorded for eternity in Greek inscriptions and sculptures that glorify them.

Suggested Reading

Boardman, *Greek Art*.

———, ed., *The Oxford History of Classical Art*.

Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred*.

Golden, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece*.

Herrmann and Kondoleon, *Games for the Gods*.

Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why was capturing motion in marble versus bronze so difficult yet a worthwhile endeavor for the sculptor?
2. Do you think this immortalization of athletes in ancient times has implications for our culture of athletics today? What about specifically in visual terms?

Parthenon Marbles—Metopes and Frieze

Lecture 18

The Parthenon was built between 447 and 432 B.C. as a testament to the glory and pride of the Athenian state. Although it seems timeless to us, calling to mind associations of epic order and stability, the Parthenon was strikingly innovative when it was built. In Greece, as we've seen, there was a much more rapid transition to a natural approach to movement and the human body than we saw in either Mesopotamia or Egypt. The magnificent sculptures of the Parthenon exhibit a fascinating, changing style, more sensuous and realistic than what came before. In this lecture, we will look closely at a few examples of this superlative sculpture: two metopes, a few pediment sculptures, and the frieze.

Metopes of the Parthenon

- A metope was part of the relief sculpture that's integral to the architecture of the Parthenon. It was high up, on the outside, and probably made first, because the temple was built from the outside in.
 - The Parthenon was a complex Doric temple, which is the first of the three orders, or styles, of Greek temples.
 - The building itself is not just a pure rectangular block; it was jiggered with alterations and curvatures. It had what are called optical refinements—essentially optical illusions, such as the curving base of the building, which made it look as if it was hugging the earth.
 - The Doric columns swell in the middle, and that curvature makes them seem both more human and more correct in their form. These optical refinements were said to create the most perfect building ever built by man. In addition, the sheer number of sculptures that were part of the building was new and astonishing.

- The newest twist on tradition was a unified program of sculptures, created under the direction of the sculptor Phidias, that were intricate and expensive to create. The sculptures told tales with gods and mythical characters. The elaborately carved metopes were created just for this building and had different themes for each side of the building.
- Metopes are conceived a bit like paintings but in relief. They're square expanses of marble, high up on the exterior walls of the temple. The metopes were separated from one another by triglyphs—three grooves between the metope sculptures. There were 92 of them, more than in any previous Greek temple.
- One metope shows a mythical battle between a centaur and a Lapith, a citizen of an ancient, mythological Greek race.
 - The myth associated with this sculpture begins with the Lapiths inviting the centaurs to a celebration of the wedding of the king's son. The centaurs, half-man and half-horse, behaved badly, drinking to excess and assaulting the Lapith women. The Lapith men naturally responded by fighting them.
 - The centaur-Lapith battle was a popular theme in the 5th century B.C. It and similar mythical scenes were chosen because Athenians could read between the lines: This was a message about their illustrious standing in the world.
 - The theme here was one of conflict: man versus beast, order versus chaos, and civilized Greeks versus barbarians, that is, the Persians. The Lapiths were the heroic and mythical earliest Greeks; the drunken, loutish, and beastly centaurs were their enemies.
 - The fact that the Lapith and centaur were shown in one-on-one fighting made the individual metopes more interesting than a massive, chaotic battle scene.

- The other sides of the temple had related conflict scenes—metopes that illustrated scenes from the Trojan War, Greeks fighting Amazons, and Olympian deities fighting giants. This series of sculptures high on the outside of the temple clearly said that Athens had made a comeback from its embarrassing defeat by the Persians in 480 B.C.

The Lapith versus the Centaur

- In this metope, we see an athletic, noble-looking young man, completely naked. He is straining, with his left leg extended at a diagonal across the centaur's back end. His torso is upright, in contrast to his legs. He's carved as a sculpture that is almost completely in the round. These metopes defy the fact that they are reliefs!
- Over the Lapith's arms and shoulders is a beautifully carved cloak. The cloak forms a sort of backdrop, almost independent of the battle scene in front of it, accentuating the drama and beauty of the relief.
- The human torso has a slightly expanded chest, as if he is about to breathe. This position forces his torso into an arch that echoes and opposes the even starker bowed line of the centaur's forepart. The muscles on the human are softer and more natural than any we've seen before; they're intrinsic to the body.
- There's an almost circular shape created by the opposing bodies; the horse back of the centaur completes this line. We can see the rhythm of opposing forces, of arched and straining muscles, embodied in this piece. This is Classical Greek rhythm, symmetry, and proportion. We have tension: the movement apart opposed by the clinging forces of the grasping hand.
- The back legs of the centaur are bent dramatically. The beast is rearing up and is unbalanced; he's losing the fight to the upright and uncompromised Lapith. The Lapith doesn't need to exert himself as much as the beast, whose bent right arm reaches behind his back in a vain effort to disengage the strangling grip of the hero.

- A side view of the metope shows the depth of the relief and the complexity of its layers of limbs, drapery, torsos, and so on.
- We can see a bit of artistic development in a comparison of this late metope with what is probably an earlier one with the same theme. The faces are visible in the earlier metope. The Lapith is serene looking and handsome, while the centaur has cruder features and the look of a barbarian.
- The Greeks may have adapted techniques for depicting composite characters, such as the centaur, from Mesopotamia. The Greeks also had a talent for working with stock figures or themes on several levels. Here, the battle is used to propagandize Greek superiority, but in this democracy, the art glorifies the people and the state rather than a ruler.
 - The Parthenon was built in the “Golden Age” of Greece, the mid-5th century B.C. Pericles, the greatest statesman of his time, called for the building of a glorious monument to celebrate the revival of Athens after the traumatic loss to the Persians and their sack of the Acropolis.
 - Just as the epic battle between the Greeks and Persians reached its denouement high above the city of Athens, the mythic battles take place in marble, high up on the exterior of the Parthenon.

Pedimental Sculptures of the Parthenon

- The pediments of the Parthenon also have a set of sculptures with the theme of conflict on one side and birth on the other. A pediment isn’t an optimal space for sculptures, and it required imagination and skill to create sculptures that work together in that space. Unfortunately, most of the pedimental sculptures were destroyed long ago.
- In a depiction of three women from a pediment, notice how the sculptor has suggested the full sensuousness of the female body without actually depicting a nude figure. The slipping and pooling



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The languor of the three goddesses depicted in a Parthenon pediment and the adjustment of their positions to the restrictions of the space highlight the skill and genius of the sculptor.

drapery seems to have an expressive meaning of its own. The use of drapery also gives the whole of the Parthenon sculptures a unifying pattern and design.

- In another pediment, the brilliance of the carving extends to the horse's heads in the pinched space in the corners. These are the chariot horses that draw the moon and sun gods across the sky. They frame the main scene and provide it with a cosmic setting and a narrative based in time and space.
- The east pediment's theme, between these horses, was the birth of Athena, but much of the sculpture here was lost. The west pediment showed a contest between Athena and Poseidon to become patron god of Athens. We've seen how this alignment of birth and rebirth with dawn in the east was customary in Egypt, and it naturally occurs in the Americas and Asia, as well.

The Parthenon Frieze

- One of the most extraordinary and novel aspects of the Parthenon is the continuous inner frieze. This frieze was an element normally found in an Ionic temple, not a Doric one; the architects and sculptors were experimenting with new forms here. The frieze was originally 525 feet long and 40 feet up from the floor. Most of what is left of it is now in the British Museum.
- The frieze has one unified theme. It is a procession in honor of Athena that divides in the beginning, makes its way around two sides, and joins again at the focal point, a frieze in the east. Participants in actual religious processions would have walked in the same direction as the carvings above them.
- The frieze seems to hurry real people along to its climax.
 - This effect is achieved by starting with slow and static scenes of preparation: Horses and groomsmen are preparing the steeds. The horses are then mounted, and they seem to gather speed in each section. The horses rear up and start to overlap one another; their energy and high spiritedness is apparent.
 - This kind of movement recalls the scene from the Standard of Ur, in which the war chariots gather momentum as each set of equines leaps and gallops higher than the last.
- A good deal of the frieze is taken up by horses, and they are some of the most beautiful ever created. We can feel their energy in the folds of skin at their shoulders and the prancing gait that erupts into a gallop. Horses were beloved by the Greeks; the animals were expensive and considered noble.
- It's interesting to compare the frieze with narrative scenes we have looked at in earlier cultures: the procession of priests on the Uruk Vase, the registers of warriors and chariots on the Standard of Ur, the Assyrian reliefs, and the relentless parade of tribute and Persian soldiers in Persepolis. Some believe that the Greeks were

consciously imitating the Achaemenid reliefs but differentiating themselves with a realistic style.

- The meaning of the scene at the focal point of the frieze is an issue of controversy. Is it the climax of the Panathenaic festival, with the folding of the peplos, a garment that was meant to adorn the colossal cult image of Athena housed by the temple? Or was it the mythical founding sacrifice of King Kekrops's daughters?
- The Greek government is currently clamoring for the return of these Parthenon marbles, and we can certainly see why: The sculptures are some of the greatest artworks ever created, and they were part of the patrimony of Athens.

Suggested Reading

Boardman, *Greek Art*.

———, ed., *The Oxford History of Classical Art*.

Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred*.

Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece*.

Questions to Consider

1. How did the Parthenon evoke, in its program of sculpture, the cosmic setting of Greek mythology and an array of its mythic episodes? Did the placement have a significant effect on viewers?
2. The messages of the Parthenon sculptures work on many levels. Do you think the citizens of Athens understood all that was implied by these sculptures?

Greek Vase Painting—"Death of Sarpedon"

Lecture 19

The Greeks were among the best in the world at using mythical allegory to promote themselves. They did it in sculpture, and as we saw on the Parthenon, they did it on a grand scale. But they also did it on a smaller, more intimate scale, on such objects as vases. The illustration of the death of Sarpedon in battle on a vase is one of the greatest versions of this scene from the *Iliad*. It transcends its medium to become a masterpiece of ancient painting. In this lecture, we'll look closely at this scene of warfare and a fallen soldier and ask what such scenes of death tell us about the cultures that created them.

The Sarpedon Vase

- Sculpture was not the only means of artistic expression in Greece. The Greeks also practiced painting. Although we have almost no surviving wall painting, we do have thousands of painted Greek vases. In fact, painted pottery achieved one of the highest peaks of Greek Archaic and Classical artistic expression.
- The vase painted with the death of Sarpedon was made sometime around 515 B.C. This era is called the Archaic age to distinguish it from the later Classical era, which started in 480 B.C. The vase itself is called a calyx krater; it's a rather large bowl (18 inches high) for mixing wine and water.
- The shape of the vase is graceful and lively. It opens out elegantly from a tiered foot, widening to its greatest extent at the mouth. The handles are curved to echo the shape of the krater. This work is signed by the master potter Euxitheos and by the famous painter Euphronios.
 - This pot is our first example of an actual signature of an artist. In ancient times, in Mesopotamia and Egypt, most artists worked anonymously. There were groups of craftsmen, and they were rarely credited or named.

- Euphronios, in contrast, was a master painter and a pioneer in creating and using a new technique of painting, known as red-figure vase painting. This new technique, which came into use about 530 B.C., was essentially a reversal of the customary colors used in vase painting and had some advantages over the earlier black-figure vase painting.
- In black-figure painting, details were scratched out, or incised, into the black figures. In red-figure painting, the details, such as muscles and hair, could be painted more fluidly on the body. The paint could even be diluted in order to get nuances of line and shading, which is exactly what Euphronios did on this vase.
- The most important aspect of a Greek vase was its picture. In most cases, the central picture featured human forms and told the story of myths featuring gods, heroes, and some animals. Because Greek vase painters did not usually paint landscapes or architecture, the sense of place for each story is quite minimal in vases.

The Action on the Vase

- One side of the vase depicts the scene from the Trojan War in which the king of Lycia, Sarpedon, is killed by the Greek warrior Patroclus. This scene is described to us by Homer in the *Iliad*.
- We see the body of Sarpedon carried by winged figures, which lets us know that this scene is essentially mythological. The figures are personifications of states of being: Sleep and Death as brothers. They were called by Zeus to soften the death of Sarpedon, his son.
- Sleep and Death are not just winged, but they wear armor, and their helmets are pushed up onto the tops of their heads. Each bends down to gently grasp the legs and shoulders of Sarpedon. Their curving postures frame the scene, and their figures are shown in profile, with foreshortened torsos. The wings of the figures present a subtle pattern—a diagonal frame—that completes the complex zigzag rhythm of their limbs and backs.



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The reverse side of the Sarpedon krater depicts a group of young men arming themselves; this contemporary scene of warfare contrasts with the mythical scene on the front of the krater.

- In the center, behind the body of Sarpedon, stands Hermes. His face is angled down toward the figure of Sleep. His left arm is upraised in a gesture that perhaps expresses shock or disbelief. In the other hand, he holds his staff and symbol, the caduceus.
- The body of Sarpedon is the most massive and important element of the composition. It is in the foreground and horizontal. It embodies the description written by Homer in the *Iliad* that Sarpedon fell like a great oak cut down in the forest.
 - Sarpedon's head is turned downward. His body is shown frontally, not in profile. Euphronios has subtly painted in the muscles with diluted paint, depicting them as almost molded rather than outlined.
 - The abdominal muscles form an oval pattern divided into four parts. The pelvic area is also accurately muscled, and the

genitals are shown. The lower legs have lines that sketch in the boniness of the knees and shins.

- The arms are muscled as well, but the foreshortened right arm drags the hand on the ground, while the left rests on the ground to the right. The legs hang limply and in disarray.
- The three spear wounds gush blood, shown in translucent, almost purple paint. They are depicted on the same diagonal line as the arm, the caduceus, and the bending figures. The blood indicates that the motion is to the right.
- This pattern of diagonals sets up the scene in a way that dramatizes the motion and gives us a sense of urgency and alarm. In many respects, the body is a translation into paint of what we saw earlier with the marble sculpture of a kouros.
- Two guards, dressed in full battle gear, look on as the body is spirited away. They add a sense of solidity and pathos to the scene: They can do nothing but stand with their spears and shields at rest.
 - Before he died, Sarpedon called out to his comrade Glaucus to keep his body so that it wouldn't fall into the hands of the enemy, who would strip it of its armor. Of course, Sarpedon is shown naked, so it appears as if the Greeks have already gotten to it.
 - The story here does not glorify war but depicts it in a gory and disheartening manner. The toll is heavy, and the endeavor is ultimately pointless.
 - Note that the stripping of armor is something we've already seen and will continue to see in scenes of warfare. The removal of a warrior's armor and clothing is the stripping of his power, leaving the pathetically defenseless body in chaotic disarray. Death and the ritualistic treatment of the body were important in Greece and almost all ancient cultures.

Other Scenes of Death

- Another famous Greek vase shows the scene right after the one we've been talking about in the Trojan War. Here, the warrior who killed Sarpedon, Patroclus, has been killed by Hector. Achilles then kills Hector in revenge and desecrates the body, dragging it behind his chariot.
- Earlier than either of these vases, geometric pottery from Greece had served as grave markers. Many of those pots illustrated a body lying in state on a funeral couch.
- Funeral games—athletic competitions—were an important part of Greek ritual mourning and were often depicted on early pottery.
- The way the body was treated after death had complex associations. It was tied up with honor, religion, and even political conflict in Greece and elsewhere. And the revealing of the defenseless body, in nakedness and death, is the scene with most pathos of all.
 - So far, we've seen naked enemies trampled underfoot in the Palette of Narmer from Egypt and the Standard of Ur from Mesopotamia. We will also see this kind of depiction in the Americas, with the Maya and the Moche. In fact, Moche pottery showing man-to-man battles has similar themes of combat, conquest, humiliation, and armor-stripping, shown in a completely different style.
 - It's interesting to see that in these two cultures, so remote from each other, the same medium is used: painted pottery. We don't know, however, if the Moche were representing real battles or mythological ones; there is no Moche writing to help us understand.
 - Still, the mistreatment and humiliation of the body of the enemy seem to be important parts of this theme of combat. Such scenes show hegemony and power over other people and groups.

- Representing grisly scenes of wounded, dead, tortured, and naked warriors in art was actually a good way to prevent future conflict. The artworks had the power of prevention and intimidation. They gave the viewer some insight into the horrors of warfare. It is hard to turn away from them and not feel affected.

Painting on Pottery

- Painting dramatic scenes on a rounded, bulbous, or flared pot presents numerous challenges, yet ancient artists figured out ways to solve them.
- Greek pots came in many shapes and sizes, and artists had to fit a coherent scene in between the handles yet somehow link it to the other side in continuity with the shape. In addition to solving this “problem,” the artist also had to tell a visually compelling story.
- This is accomplished on Greek pottery by using a continuous frieze of decoration—a band that goes around the pot and ties it together. In the Sarpedon vase, Euphronios used a complex and pleasing palmette chain on the top. There is a larger palmette and lotus decoration on the bottom. They set off the dramatic scene in the center and make it more decorative.
- On the other side of the pot, Euphronios has depicted a group of young men putting on their arms in preparation for war. It contrasts with the mythical scene on the front by showing what looks like a contemporary scene of warfare. It’s not as much of a masterwork as the front, but it ties the theme in with something that the Greek citizens would have recognized.
- The Greek idea of narrative in scenes on pottery has a forerunner in Mesopotamian cylinder seals. The design of a cylinder seal could be rolled into clay, impressing a scene of action or decoration without beginning or end. Similarly, cylinder seals showing combat scenes of nude heroes grappling with lions foreshadow the story of Herakles in Greece.

- A later vase painting by Douris of the death of Memnon is not as complex or sophisticated as the Sarpedon vase, but it still beautifully conveys the agony of a mother on the death of her son. Such representations warn us of the futility of war and the finality of death, yet we appreciate the beauty of the art that conveys such sorrow.

Suggested Reading

Boardman, *Greek Art*.

———, ed., *The Oxford History of Classical Art*.

Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred*.

Clark, Elston, and Hart, *Understanding Greek Vases*.

Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think this scene tells us about the Greek attitude toward death? How about specifically the death of a warrior?
2. Greek culture glorified war and competition, yet the Trojan War was a senseless conflict that resulted in the deaths of many heroes. Do you see that glorification in the Sarpedon vase, with its supernatural elements, or do you feel that the scene shows torment and pain?

Aphrodite of Knidos

Lecture 20

Did you ever wonder where or how the Western tradition of the beautiful female nude in art began? Remarkably, this is one idea whose origin we can pinpoint in time and place. We actually have a Roman marble copy of the Greek statue that launched this trend. The ancient masterpiece created a major controversy over its nudity at the time it was made, about 350 B.C. It is of Aphrodite, the ancient Greek goddess of love and beauty. In the 1st century A.D., Pliny the Elder acclaimed this Aphrodite by the sculptor Praxiteles to be the greatest sculpture in the world.

Greek Realism

- For the Greeks, realism, or mimesis, and the pursuit of perfection were paramount. This was particularly true in sculpture depicting the human form. But in the early years of Greek culture, it was applied mostly to men and the athletic male nude, which we discussed earlier in the lectures on Kritios Boy and Myron's *Discobolus*.
- In the Archaic period of Greece (6th century B.C.), life-size statues of handsome young men, called kouroi, were traditionally depicted nude, reflecting the way Greek men practiced athletic endeavors. The Greeks seemed most interested in the physical beauty and musculature of the young male, which in turn reflected something about the goodness of his character.
- These earliest Greek statues had started out by imitating the Egyptian life-size stone statues of pharaohs and nobles. But instead of remaining consistently idealized, the kouroi started to show signs of life and realistic musculature. This interest in realism, or naturalism, along with physical perfection is a hallmark of Greek art.

- The most distinct and memorable artistic change in the Classical age was the use of contrapposto—the natural S-curve given the body when weight is shifted to one hip. This position makes the sculpted person look at ease and shows how the totality of a human body actually reacts to motion or changes in posture.
 - This contrapposto stance is the position used in the Aphrodite of Knidos. Aphrodite looks as if she has been caught in mid-action, shifting her weight leisurely from her free leg to the standing one.
 - Her posture is much more languid and sensual than any of the athletic male bodies seen in Greek sculpture.

The Female Nude

- This Aphrodite was the first monumental statue that showed a goddess in the nude. In contrast to young men, Greek women in the Archaic period were almost always shown draped and, up to Classical times, with their bodies hidden. They look more like static columns than depictions of live humans in this early period of Greek art.
- It was quite unseemly for a respectable Greek girl or woman, much less a goddess, to be shown nude at this time. The culture shielded young women from view. Though girls married young, at perhaps 14 or so, respectable women were probably not often seen out and about. This is why the emphasis in sculpted korai tended to be on the decorative aspects: the elaborate drapery and ornate hairstyles.
- Aphrodite, however, was a goddess, not a human. Her most important role was to be a model of the sensuous, beautiful, and alluring. This is where her power arose from. She was meant to inspire others to love, and ultimately, she was meant to ensure fertility. Thus, Aphrodite provided to be a good candidate or exposure.
- We can see a sort of evolution in Greek female drapery to no drapery at all.

- In time, sculptors chose to show their mastery of stone and the human body by carving almost transparent drapery on Greek goddesses and mortals, so that the body was revealed in all its splendor.
- We see an example in an earlier sculpture of Aphrodite, the Ludovisi Throne, an image of Aphrodite emerging from the sea, helped by two draped young women. The wet cloth of Aphrodite's skimpy gown clings to her flesh and makes it seem even more alluring.
- But Aphrodite is not completely naked. This sculpture, in fact, is religious in nature, and its sensuousness celebrates a myth central to the early Greek religion: that of Aphrodite rising from the foam of the sea, an event that supposedly took place off the coast of Cyprus.
- The foam in the sea was said to be the seed of Aphrodite's father, the personification of the sky. The bathing urn beside her reminds us of this watery origin and serves as a ritual bath, perhaps like the ones young brides took before their nuptials. Even in this seemingly sensual statue, the fertility aspect of Aphrodite is emphasized. She is, in fact, an object of worship.
- Of course, in European art and culture, the image of Venus, which is Aphrodite's Roman name and persona, rises from a half shell in Botticelli's famous painting *The Birth of Venus*. This painting dates to 1485, but we can see from the gesture and posture of Venus that it's clearly modeled on the famous Aphrodite of Praxiteles.

The Role of the Viewer

- In the statue, it looks as if Aphrodite has just left her bath or is about to begin it. She possibly has been startled while naked by an intruder. She seems to make a reflexive move with one hand to cover her genitals. The other hand has reached for and is grasping

her robe. In the Botticelli painting, the goddess shields her breasts from the gaze of the onlooker.

- But is the goddess really being modest? Her averted gaze in the sculpture could suggest shame or shyness—or coyness.
- Note, too, that she doesn't quite succeed in covering herself totally. The tilt of her head and the slight exaggeration of the hand gesture could be interpreted as drawing attention to her genitalia. After all, she is the goddess of sexuality and love.
- Both the eroticism of the statue and its realistically sensual treatment of the female nude were quite new in the art of the ancient world. This statue provides a reference point for all the female nudes that succeeded Praxiteles's masterpiece.
- It is not only the nudity of a supremely beautiful, erotic goddess that is new in this statue but also the way in which she seems to interact with the viewer, who is almost an interloper.
 - We feel as if we have caught Aphrodite in a private moment and seen something that we were not meant to see. We might feel shame or excitement at catching the goddess undressed.
 - That is exactly what Praxiteles wished to capture: not something frontal and forthright but something slightly hidden, secretive, perhaps forbidden, and thus, a bit exciting.
- Praxiteles is also, perhaps for the first time in Western art, making a moral statement about female nudity. He's not just portraying it impartially. In fact, by portraying the goddess in what seems to be a private moment, he both makes her more accessible and calls attention to her attributes of beauty and sensuality, the source of her power.

Aphrodite's Predecessors

- Although many claim that this statue began the tradition of the female nude in Western art, we find a long tradition in the ancient Near East of goddesses who were forthright in their sexuality.

Indeed, Aphrodite's alluring and dangerous qualities arose from her many predecessors in the ancient Near East.

- Aphrodite's most important and earliest cognate was the ancient Mesopotamian fertility goddess known as Inana in the Sumerian language and Ishtar in the later Semitic Akkadian tongue. Inana or Ishtar was the most important god in the Sumerian pantheon; from her flowed all fertility—of the land, the people, the animals. We learned a bit about Inana's role earlier when we looked at the Uruk Vase.
- There's a long history of what are often called mother goddesses in the ancient Mediterranean and even back to the times of cave art. Usually, these are depicted as stocky, almost obese figurines. It seems that these figurines were cult objects meant to encourage fertility.
- A few thousand years later, we begin to find metal figurines of nude goddesses or votives (offering figures) in Syria and Turkey that are much slimmer. These women are shapely, frontal, and completely nude, and they often clasp their breasts, as if to emphasize them.
- There is a strong tradition of goddesses from almost every region of the eastern Mediterranean who embody beliefs in fertility, motherhood, sexuality, marriage, and sometimes war, constellations, and different animals. These goddesses, who are known by different



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Aphrodite was the femme fatale of Mount Olympus—irresistibly beautiful, powerful, capricious, tempestuous, and famous for leaving her various lovers to unfortunate fates; many artists found her a perfect subject.

names in these regions and have slightly different characteristics, include Ishtar, Ishara from Syria, and Astarte from the Levant.

- These goddesses, like Aphrodite, often also had strong associations with war, the evening star, and birds or other animals. The goddesses from the East didn't hide their nudity; in fact, they were frontal and often pointed out or emphasized their sexual characteristics.
- This visual link to the East emphasizes the unusual modesty of Aphrodite's depiction in the years before Praxiteles's bold move. In fact, depicting Aphrodite as a nude was not entirely new and shocking; Praxiteles just drew on a different, earlier, Eastern, and older tradition.
- One thing we can infer is that almost every ancient culture seems to need a cult of this sort, emphasizing love, sex, and fertility as powers that are basic to human existence.

Seduction and War

- Seduction is key to Aphrodite's sexual powers. It brought not only delight and fertility but also sometimes strife and destruction. The Trojan War, for example, was caused in part by a contest in which Aphrodite was named the fairest of the goddesses.
- This martial aspect is a trait that is important to Ishtar in Mesopotamia and seems, in some respects, to be a universal companion to goddesses and sexuality. After all, wars are fought for access to resources, and that includes women to bear children as the most basic resource of all.
- But the Aphrodite by Praxiteles is more concerned with the myth of origins, including precious water and seduction by beauty. Praxiteles, for the first time, attempted to create a nude and sensuous figure of the goddess. And she is still the most influential and definitive female nude of antiquity.

Suggested Reading

Boardman, *Greek Art*.

———, ed., *The Oxford History of Classical Art*.

Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred*.

Kondoleon, ed., *Aphrodite and the Gods of Love*.

Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do you think Aphrodite of Knidos was viewed and interpreted by people from the eastern Mediterranean versus people from Greece and the West? By men versus women?
2. We have a long history of secular female nudes in European art. Based on the history of such sculptures as Aphrodite, do you think modern Europeans and Americans can ever understand the religious meanings and centrality of the forces she was said to embody?

Laocoön—Three-Dimensional Narrative

Lecture 21

The sculpture called the Laocoön depicts another dramatic moment from the saga of the Trojan Wars. The main figure in the sculpture is a Trojan priest, Laocoön, but it's unclear whether he is a prophet warning of doom or himself a doomed sinner. This sculpture has one of the most illustrious and controversial histories of any from the ancient world, which may be why it affected Michelangelo and other Renaissance artists so strongly. Others, too, from Pliny to Goethe to art historians in the 20th century, have each had different interpretations of it. The fact that we may never know all the answers to the questions surrounding this sculpture only adds to its fascination for modern viewers.

History of the Laocoön

- The sculpture shows two enormous, thick, writhing serpents wrapping their coils around a muscular man. Laocoön is already in agony, and this shows in his twisting torso and his contorted face and limbs. The snakes simultaneously attack two smaller figures, young boys on either side of their father.
- This amazingly intricate and expressive sculpture turns out to be very hard to pin down. We still don't know definitively who made it, exactly who it depicts, or when it was made.
- In A.D. 77, Pliny the Elder wrote of a statue created by a trio of craftsmen, Hagesander, Polydorus, and Athenodorus of Rhodes. The sculpture stood in the palace of the Roman emperor Titus. It was carved from a single block of marble, showing Laocoön and his children "and the wonderful clasping coils of snakes."
- When the sculpture that was dug out of the ground in Rome in 1506, it was immediately identified as the work discussed by Pliny, but this statue wasn't carved from one block of marble. Was it the original Greek version or a Roman copy?

- If the sculpture was original, it would have belonged to the Hellenistic era of Classical Greek art. Hellenistic works are recognized for their emphasis on emotion, pathos, and movement in moments of drama. The Hellenistic phase came after the Classical and is generally dated from 332 B.C. to 30 B.C. According to some scholars, the Laocoön would appear to be dated in the style of the 1st century B.C.

Hellenistic Features of the Sculpture

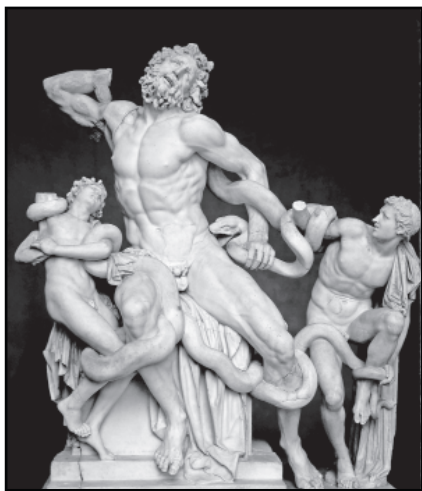
- The expressiveness of the Laocoön is far greater than what we've seen before. The facial expressions are masks of suffering and agony. The heads are tilted back, with lips parted in pain. The wild locks of hair repeat the contorted curves of snakes and limbs. This is not what we saw in the High Classical period, with its stoic and noble faces.
- The positioning of the bodies is exaggeratedly emotive. The diagonally stretched left leg of the main figure is elongated, strongly muscled, and webbed with veins that seem to pop to the surface. His musculature is strong but not exactly that of an idealized youth; it shows great form but bulges and undulates in a way that is almost as alarming as the subject matter.
- The snake has an evil face with a wrinkled brow and is caught in the moment right before the bite. Of course, constricting snakes are not venomous, and venomous snakes do not constrict their prey; however, the artistic license taken here makes use of the visceral fear of snakes we innately possess as a tool of the emotive effect of the image.
- Notice that the overall composition is pyramidal. Laocoön is the highest point in the center; the boys continue the diagonal lines to the sides. This shape keeps the sculpture from being too chaotic to comprehend.

- One child leans backward, and his head and torso echo his father's. The snake has wrapped itself around one arm and another coil wraps around the legs of both father and son, holding them together.
- The other boy looks up at his father in anguish. Although his head is tilted up, he bends down with one shoulder to try to pull off the coil of the snake wrapped around his shin. His left knee is deeply bent upward, emphasizing and dramatizing this action.
- The frontal view of the sculpture doesn't tell the whole story. The sculptor encourages viewers to walk around the back, following the motion of the heads and limbs. This is a three-dimensional experience, unlike the architectural sculpture we saw from the Parthenon.
- The Laocoön represents a new phase in depicting humans. Hellenistic art was full of movement and torsion—twisted bodies that express emotion. What we have here is essentially a narrative depicted in three dimensions. It's meant to portray the highest point of the dramatic arc, the moment with most pathos and potential.

The Myth of Laocoön

- In the version of Laocoön's story that comes from Vergil's *Aeneid*, Laocoön was the priest of Apollo in Troy. When the wooden horse appeared outside the gates of the city, Laocoön warned the populace that it was hollow, but no one believed him. He was punished by Apollo or another god, who sent two sea serpents to kill him and his twin sons. He is thus portrayed as an innocent and tragic martyr. He tried to save Troy but was not heeded.
- But this story isn't the only possibility. The martyrdom story is superseded by a lost tragedy by Sophocles called *Laocoön* that is based on a different myth with another explanation for Laocoön's death. In this case, Laocoön breaks his priestly vow of celibacy and takes a wife. In some accounts, he has sexual relations in the sanctuary of Apollo, a sacrilegious act. He is then punished for his sin with death—for him and his children.

- More modern experts see this impious episode as the true story behind this image of Laocoön, a story of punishment for the sin of impiety, rather than for telling the truth about the wooden horse. If that's so, it adds to the emotional luster of the statue. It becomes more understandable that the priest would be punished and that his children would also die.



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The motion of the limbs of the central figure in the Laocoön is, in a sense, a centrifugal force that opens out the sculpture, while the coiling of the snakes is a centripetal force, drawing toward the center.

The Altar at Pergamon

- A strong visual tradition of epic moments depicted in art helped to shape this statue of the Laocoön group, and it, in turn, shaped other sculptures. It compares most closely with parts of the famous Altar of Zeus at Pergamon, now in Berlin.
- Pergamon was a Greek city in what is today Turkey. Its art was part of a desire to position itself as a major imperial power. To this end, an enormous altar was built, decorated with a frieze of narrative battles. The main scene of the frieze that is relevant for us is the battle of gods and giants.
- The Pergamon frieze is enormously complex, and it was sculpted beneath a beautiful Ionic colonnade. This huge monument was built to commemorate a military victory, celebrating the might of the city by showing a related myth.
- The gods and giants here are shown in a new, florid, exaggerated style. The figures are huge and deeply cut; they are agitated and

dramatic, and their bodies are heavy and muscular. This is the same style we see in the Laocoön, only multiplied exponentially!

- The theme at Pergamon is, like the Laocoön, one of punishment. But it's clearly unlike earlier Greek art from the Classical period. The focus in the Hellenistic age shifts to the one who is punished and what he feels, rather than the punishers. And although Classical art tried to achieve and encourage a quest for perfection—in body, mind, and spirit—the new Hellenistic style discards that social role.
- The viewer is now meant to identify with the victim rather than the victor, suffering over calm detachment. The kings are meant to be identified with the gods. The people are on the level of the defeated giants. All this amounts to the sort of visual propaganda that we saw earlier in the Assyrian palace reliefs.
- One particular part of the frieze shows the same schema used in the Laocoön. The goddess Athena pulls to the right, on the diagonal, with flowing and swirling drapery. She grips the head of a giant, Alcyoneus, who pulls away to the left. His expression shows anguish, grief, and fear. His naked body's posture is exactly the same as Laocoön's, and the pathos of the face, as well as the situation, is similar.
- The snake is also shown in this scene from the frieze. This is a scaled, thick-bodied serpent of Athena, who is about to bite the giant in the chest. The mother of Alcyoneus looks up at Athena in anguish, a position we also see with the anguished son looking up to his father.
- All these writhing, dramatically gesticulating sufferers were a hallmark of Hellenistic art, which prized the emotional moment and focused on the sufferer. We're seeing here a glimpse of the birth of a narrative art that shows emotion and is, in a sense, more complex, with its possible viewpoints and viewer identification. It also has a moral lesson to teach: Those who transgress moral law are punished.

- The notion of Classical idealizing and realistic human forms gave way to something else in the 4th century B.C. to the 1st century A.D.: narrative art with emotion and intense suffering or melodrama. We haven't seen human emotion at all in ancient art up to this point, although we have seen extreme emotion in animals, as in the Lion Hunt relief of Ashurbanipal.
 - The animal world and the bestial beings we see in the centaurs, giants, and other mythical creatures are always on a lower level than humans. This association of the beastly or lower orders with those being punished can also be seen in the Laocoön. If we interpret him as being punished for sinful behavior, he becomes like the giant at Pergamon, a sufferer. It is a powerful moral lesson cast in marble.
 - Art, in some senses, becomes an instrument of social control. It's a reminder to behave according to the laws of god and man. Horror and fear at seeing these scenes encouraged the viewer to identify with the sufferer and feel his fate.

Suggested Reading

Boardman, *Greek Art*.

———, ed., *The Oxford History of Classical Art*.

Brilliant, *My Laocoön*.

Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred*.

Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does a dramatic scene, such as that shown in the Laocoön, compare to the sorts of sculpture we have seen from Classical Greece in terms of moment, action, and emotion?
2. Why do you think this sculpture garnered so much controversy and inspired so many different views?

Column of Trajan

Lecture 22

The 125-foot-tall Column of Trajan is an amazing feat of imagination, artistic skill, and engineering. It depicts a 650-foot-long story, spiraling upward in marble. More than 2,000 figures are carved at a scale two-thirds of life size. The purpose of the column was nothing less than to ensure immortality for the Roman emperor Trajan. To this end, the emperor and his architect, Apollodorus, created this massive monument to the military campaigns of Trajan's rule. It was dedicated by the Senate and people of Rome, according to its inscription, in A.D. 113. There was nothing quite like it in the world when it was conceived, and it remains one of the wonders of ancient art.

A Monument to the Emperor

- The elaborate scenes represented on Trajan's Column present a glorified account of the emperor's military campaigns against the Dacians, who lived where Romania is today. The scenes record not just the battles but the work of the Roman forces as they advanced, building structures, fording rivers, performing religious rituals, and setting up camps.
- The scenes also record information about the Dacians and their leader. Scenes included the daily life and rituals of both the Roman conquerors and the vanquished. There are landscapes, gods, personified rivers, and much more!
- The column served as visual propaganda by showing a historical narrative with the battles and conquests of Trajan. The base also served as a sepulcher and funerary monument for the emperor. A spiral staircase inside the hollow column allowed the top to be used as a viewing platform.
- A statue of Trajan once towered atop the column (now replaced by a statue of Saint Peter), raising the emperor above all others and

allowing him to look out on his forum. As a whole, the column glorified the Roman Empire and documented its ability to expand its territory and bring civilization to barbarians.

- The column was part of a complex arrangement of structures that constituted Trajan's Forum, a huge open space with buildings that included the Temple of Divine Trajan and two libraries. The column was, of course, the highest thing in the forum, emphasizing the elevation of the emperor above the people.
 - This elevation was a different approach to the viewer than we saw with Greek or even Mesopotamian representations of humans. With Greek sculpture, such as the goddess Aphrodite of Knidos, the viewer was more or less on the same level as the subject, which allowed the sculpture to communicate directly with viewers.
 - In contrast, by elevating the statue of himself, Trajan has most emphatically proclaimed his exalted status as emperor. It is the scenes that wind up the column that are meant to engage viewers.

Format of the Column

- There are 155 scenes on the column, each a glimpse of a place or event on Trajan's two military campaigns into Dacian territory. The scenes are all different, but there is repetition of ritual and scenes, establishing a rhythm.
- The progression of scenes is not ended definitively (or vertically) with borders, lines, or other devices. The scenes are continuous, in a sense, as they wind around the column in an upward spiral.
- Because we don't see an endpoint but, rather, an unfurling of these different places and the travels of the army, we are meant to feel as if we were present at the events, observing all. And the bird's eye view helps in many places to make the scenes more comprehensible and identifiable.

- In this continuity of narrative, the column resembles two devices we know. One is the movie, a 20th-century invention that tells a narrative in a linear and all-knowing visual style. Looking back to something far more ancient, it also recalls the thinking behind Mesopotamian cylinder seals and the Assyrian palace reliefs we looked at earlier.
 - The invention of the cylinder seal released an impulse for endless design or repetitive narrative. An incised seal could be rolled over clay for as far as the object would allow.
 - Originally, cylinder seals were used to seal woven material to jar tops; damp clay was used to seal the joint on, say, a vessel of oil. The rolling seal covered much more area than a stamp seal and made the closure more secure. It also may have helped cultures in Mesopotamia to envision narrative. The continuous unfolding of a story enabled by a rolling seal was a natural and obvious way to show events.
 - The use of registers that unfold a story, such as a battle or a hunt, as we saw with the lion hunts, made the Assyrian rulers' deeds the focus of the visual propaganda and told specific stories.
 - We can now imagine the column as one long register of relief, like the Assyrian battle scenes, which rolls itself upward in a sharp spiral progression from the bottom to the top of the column. This also recalls a scroll, which unfurls to reveal its story.
 - Most scholars now believe that the unusual form of relief took its form from either scrolls—none of which survive from that period—or the custom of wrapping painted fabric around columns on feast days.
- There's no question that the format is unusual, but the spiraling, circular aspect presents several problematic issues. For example, the whole composition can't be seen from any one vantage point.

The fact that viewers had to walk around the column repeatedly to appreciate the development of the scenes may have simulated a funerary ritual.

Details of the Scenes

- Trajan reigned from A.D. 98 to 117. He wanted to commemorate his victory over the Dacians, just as Naram-Sin had commemorated his victory over the Lullubi people 2,000 or so years earlier.

- The column does not have as many battle scenes as we might expect. Instead, there are numerous scenes showing construction, sacrifice, and travel. This was probably intentional, to divert attention from the cost of war in lives. It also showed the beneficial and civilizing undertakings of the Roman army.



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- Carved on the square base is a collection of Dacian weapons and shields—collected by the victorious Romans—but no Dacians. Above the cubic base is a victory wreath. The arms were valuable booty, but they also represent the stripping of armor that was an important aspect of defeat and humiliation for conquered fighters.

The carving of the scenes on Trajan's Column is done in a charming, almost naïve style; the artists used bird's eye perspective and other viewpoints to pack in as much information as possible.

- From the base, the scenes proceed chronologically. The army crosses the Danube, personified as a bust of an older and colossal man. Behind him, we see the river with boats and a backdrop of buildings. These are depicted in realistic detail, with bricks, windows, and arches shown in differing perspectives. To the right of the Danube figure is a fascinating scene: the Romans crossing a pontoon bridge made of boats lined up in the water.

- Above the Danube scene, we see Roman forces building fortifications. Different types of labor are depicted, from handing off bricks to carrying logs. Movement and a sense of industry are achieved by diagonal-leaning stances for the men and the illustration of so many figures in a small field.
- To the left of the building scene, we see Trajan addressing his troops. In the next spiral, we see the finished military camp, and above that is Trajan receiving the Dacian ambassadors. The two Dacian campaigns are cleverly separated by a large figure of Victory writing Trajan's conquests on her shield. Several battle scenes are depicted, as well as the suicide of the Dacian leader.
- The Dacians are depicted as barbaric, often shown in a purposefully chaotic way. In one scene, a Dacian warrior is dipping a cup into a bowl of liquid; this has been interpreted as a depiction of mass suicide. But the Dacians are also shown to be worthy opponents and noble in some respects to demonstrate that the emperor had earned his triumph.
- For us today, the column is a treasure trove of information about Roman warfare. It documents the forces, including the weapons, the appearance of Moorish cavalry and German irregulars, and so forth. Some fascinating religious ceremonies are also shown on the column, including an animal sacrifice called a *Suovetaurilia*, performed to purify the Roman army.
- Note that the artist sometimes uses two different vantage points in order to make the scenes clear. Compositional unity is not the primary goal of the artist in this frieze. In many respects, it's more like a pictorial work of art—a painting—than a sculpture.

The Impact of the Column

- The general theme of civilized nation versus chaotic barbarians is something we've seen before in Egypt, notably on Tut's chest and on the metopes of the Parthenon in Greece. Of course, this theme provides the justification for warfare and the subordination

of foreign peoples. The Romans believed that their forces would civilize “barbarians.” The art portrayed the Romans as constructive, rather than only destructive.

- The extraordinary thing about this work is its density of figures, scenes, and information about actual events. The skill necessary to carve something this complex is a marvel. Imagine trying to plan the decoration in relief on huge marble drums and then carving the scenes in a spiral.
- The intent of this column, ultimately, was to glorify Trajan and his program of public works. It elevated him above all others and deified him. The magnificent carvings, even though they were not completely visible to the ordinary viewer on the ground, served the aims of the emperor on a conceptual level. The extraordinary legacy of building and artworks was felt to be an important aspect of achieving immortality for the ruler.
- This particular form of commemoration was not to be repeated. It was one of the most labor-intensive and grand artistic experiments in narrative history and art that served a ruler. It has a unity of purpose and novelty of form that made it stand out as one of the masterpieces of the ancient world and certainly something to remember!

Suggested Reading

Boardman, ed., *The Oxford History of Classical Art*.

Questions to Consider

1. Can you enumerate how many different ways this column serves as propaganda for the ruler and the state?
2. The novel form of the column presents both problems and advantages. Where do you think it succeeds in its purposes, and where do you think it fails?

Bronzes of Ancient China

Lecture 23

In 1976, Chinese archaeologists made a spectacular find: an untouched royal tomb dating from about 1250 B.C. The excavation was undertaken in a village just outside of Anyang, the capital of the fabled Shang dynasty and a birthplace of Chinese culture. Even more exciting was the fact that the tomb's occupant was a queen consort, Lady Fu Hao, the wife of a major Shang dynasty king, Wu Ding. Lady Fu Hao was an extraordinary personage in her own right; she was called the warrior queen and wielded great power. In this lecture, we'll look at some beautiful bronze vessels from the Shang dynasty, as well as some later examples.

Chinese Bronze Vessels

- Bronze vessels were the quintessential art form of the ancient Chinese. Bronze was a difficult, challenging, and expensive medium in which to work. Chinese bronzes are heavy, like any bronze sculpture, and they appeal to the sense of touch, as well as sight. They're meant to be handled to be fully appreciated.
- The bronzes in museums today were mostly found in tombs. They range in shape from cauldrons or food vessels to imaginatively shaped wine-pouring vessels (*guang*), wine cups (*gu*), and more rarely, realistic animal shapes, such as rhinos and elephants.
- The bronzes were used for ceremonial meals, rites that involved sacrifices of food and wine for dead ancestors. They were made for kings and elites and conferred power on those who were given these bronzes as gifts.
 - The sacrificial rites performed using bronze vessels were meant to honor, feed, and communicate with ancestral spirits and deities.



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Chinese bronze vessels often consisted of fairly abstract, geometric shapes, but they also took the form of real or fantastic animals.

- The rites were also meant to secure the deities' help in ensuring survival, success, and abundance and warding off evil for the enactors of the ritual.
- Not only were these vessels used to prepare wine and ceremonial meals for the dead, but they were also used in banquets at ancestral halls. After the meals, the vessels were put into the tombs of kings and other nobles.

Symbolism and Use of Bronze Vessels in China

- As we might expect at this point in our course, these bronzes played a specific role in supporting the power and authority of kings. Supposedly, Emperor Yu, founder of the possibly mythical Xia dynasty, had nine large *ding* (tripod vessels) cast for himself. His possession of these vessels is what gave him symbolic power. Those who held the vessels subsequently also possessed that power and authority.

- Shang and Zhou kings would have had impressive funerals, and these bronze vessels would have been put in their graves to indicate their power and wealth and to continue the communication between dead spirits and the living. It's fascinating that these bronze serving dishes played an important role in conferring power on kings and served as funerary objects. Trajan's Column was also a funerary object but very different from the Chinese bronzes!
 - The Column of Trajan is our longest continuous historical narrative in stone, honoring Trajan and telling us what he did on his military campaign. We're used to seeing narrative art in the West, and we've seen narrative art with the Mesopotamians and the Greeks.
 - But with the Chinese, we are looking at a kind of artwork that has no narrative. These are almost exclusively static forms; rarely is any action depicted. The bronzes are objects that can be appreciated solely for their formal elements of design, not for any story they tell us on their surfaces.
- The bronzes are similar in some ways to the grave goods from the Royal Cemetery at Ur in Mesopotamia, dating to 2550 B.C.
 - We know from Sumerian literature that the deceased had banquets in the underworld. A goblet and gold bowl from the Royal Cemetery at Ur were probably put in the grave for this purpose.
 - The living also often feasted with the dead, in or near their tombs. This was done in China, Rome, Egypt, and elsewhere.
 - Including gold dishes and serving utensils in grave goods also served to impress those who witnessed the funeral ceremony. The fact that such precious things were being buried emphasized the wealth of the deceased and reinforced the power of the heirs.
 - Both the Ur vessels and the Chinese bronzes were found in tombs with sacrifices, demonstrating the rulers' power over their subjects.

- Greek wine containers, food servers, and water vessels—all superbly decorated—were also placed in graves to serve the dead.
- The Chinese bronzes were not meant to be standalone sculptures. There would have been groupings of different types of vessels placed on a bronze altar as a set. The sets included certain standardized shapes for particular functions: a *gu* for drinking wine, a *ding* for food preparation, and so forth. Lady Fu Hao's tomb contained a wine set for the "great sacrifice."

Animal Vessels

- Besides sacrificed people, Fu Hao's tomb also contained four tigers or tiger heads. Tigers, as powerful animals and predators, clearly served as metaphors for royal power and power over life and death. A tiger vessel now in a museum in Paris appears to either menace or protect a human; it is one of the most compelling of Chinese tiger representations in bronze.
 - The vessel was meant to contain wine or another ritual beverage, but the form and design are much more important than the function. The tiger or, perhaps, tigress has a wide-open maw that threatens to devour the child who clings to its front and whose head is about to disappear in its jaws!
 - The child's eyes are wide, but it doesn't look terrified; it appears to be hugging the tiger's underside, almost as if it were a primate baby. The child's feet rest on the paws of the animal, which also serve as stands for the vessel, along with the curling tail.
 - In a peculiar detail, a goat stands on the neck ridge of the tiger, and goat heads protrude from the handle's ends. Smaller relief decorations run riot over the surface of the animal; these include dragons, snakes, elephant parts, stippling for whiskers, and scaly patterns.
 - We don't know whether this object is making a statement about the strength of a predator, the sacrifice of a child, or a rescue of a child by a wild animal. It may represent a legend concerning

a child nurtured by a tigress. In that case, it would be similar in some respects to clan and animal imagery that illustrates mythic and totemic origins. It brings to mind Romulus and Remus, raised by their wolf mother in Rome.

- Still, the open maw of the tiger disturbs us and introduces the possibility of other interpretations that are not so positive. It is this ambivalent and uncertain response that the piece evokes that leaves so strong an impression.
- Some of the most beloved bronzes are vessels called *tsun* that were designed entirely in animal shapes. One spectacularly large example was unearthed at Chuanxingshan and is in the shape of a wild boar.
- Elephants could also be found as *tsun*, and rather humorously, wine could be poured through the trunk. Such elephant *tsun* were covered in rich relief decoration, including depictions of dragons, tigers, and other animals.
- An animal that departs from these *tsun* and other vessels in style is a rhinoceros that is now at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. This animal is almost completely naturalistic, with no surface decoration or incising, which makes it one of the most unusual animals in the Shang dynasty tradition.
- These animals—elephant, rhinoceros, and tiger—are not extant in China now, but they may have been in range of the population and artists 3,000 years ago. The elephant, rhino, tiger, and water buffalo were all strong, noble, and respected beasts. They evoked power and were linked to totems, myth, and legend. Their shapes also worked extraordinarily well for sculptural representations.

Bronze Technology

- The development of bronze technology was a significant achievement for ancient people. Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin (and sometimes lead), and it's preferable to both copper and tin in

their pure states because when melded, it becomes more durable. It is also more appealing in color—a greenish bronze rather than dull tin or lead. It's an alloy that's particularly good for mold-made objects.

- Bronze in China was made by smelting local copper and then adding tin. These metals were far more plentiful in China than almost anywhere else. Because they didn't need to use the metal sparingly, the Chinese could cast it in large amounts, rather than hammering it, which required less metal.
- Chinese metalworkers used a difficult technique called piece-mold casting.
 - Piece-mold casting involved making a clay model of the vessel, drying it, and then molding softer clay around it. The outer clay pieces were then removed in sections. Additional surface decorations could be carved into the mold.
 - The pieces were reassembled, and a core was put inside. Molten bronze was poured into the area between the core and mold and allowed to cool, forming the finished vessel.
 - Casting was a painstaking process, but over time, artists and craftsmen acquired greater skill and were able to create more complex decorations and different kinds of vessels. Often, the decoration was predicated on the areas determined to be separate by the mold pieces. That means that the separate parts had to be joined with molten metal that could be shaped in interesting ways where the pieces met.
 - Piece-mold casting enabled much sharper detail in decoration and allowed artists to easily create square or rectangular vessels and make them in multiples.
- The earliest *ding* vessels were tripods, but beautiful rectangular *dings* were created later. These were among the most architectonic, or geometric, of shapes. The style of bronzes evolved into a more

developed and sculpturally decorated surface. Sometimes, the bronzes had spikey and aggressive projections.

- A decoration that is characteristic of almost all ancient Chinese bronzes is a sort of abstracted animal face called a *taotie*, often with two bodies symmetrically arranged on either side of the face. This motif was used for decoration from a very early time and lends itself well to bronzes and symmetrical, ornate surface patterning.
- Ultimately, bronze vessels are surely one of the crowning achievements of Chinese culture. They are even more astounding when we understand the sheer amount of labor required to reach these results. The fact that the Chinese artists could manipulate molten bronze into this variety of shapes and vessels is remarkable. Their imaginations seemed to have been freed from many of the normal limitations of the medium of bronze.

Suggested Reading

Bagley, *Shang Ritual Bronzes in the Arthur M. Sackler Collections*.

Chi, "The Tuan Fang Altar Set Reexamined."

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think it says about a culture when the major art form is technically difficult yet the results are essentially functional—a dish or vessel?
2. Given that they were placed in graves, these vessels clearly served a function in ancestor worship. How do you think the decoration plays a role in this, particularly the emphasis on pattern and dragon forms rather than human ones?

Great Stupa at Sanchi

Lecture 24

The Great Stupa at Sanchi is the most ancient stone structure in India. It was built to contain the relics of the Buddha by the great emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century B.C. The stupa rises to 54 feet high and is 120 feet across. Near it are smaller stupas, built for the Buddha's disciples. A stupa is a domed mound that resembles an earth tumulus, a funerary mound that existed in early India, Greece, and elsewhere. But this mound has symbolism beyond the funerary; it is a Buddhist place of worship. At its core is a relic of the Buddha—some of his ashes, which are thought to have living energy because they contain his spiritual essence.

Symbolism of the Great Stupa

- When the Buddha died at the age of 80, he was cremated and his ashes were divided into eight portions. These ashes were then distributed to eight rulers, who built stupas over them. Only the stupa at Sanchi survives.
- In this basic respect, Sanchi is a funerary monument, but the Buddhists believed in rebirth, which means that this stupa has more overt symbolism that is cosmic in nature rather than purely funerary.
- The stupa's structure puts forth tenets of Buddhism and illustrates the Buddhist conception of the world. It represents both the universe and the dharma, that is, the path according to the laws of the Buddha.
- Buddhist pilgrims came to this and other stupas over hundreds of years primarily to venerate the Buddha. The stupa, in its various parts and purposes, actually represents the totality of the Buddhist world. In the most basic terms, its high base represents the earth; its body, the dome, represents the sky or cosmic egg; and its center is the *axis mundi* or world tree.



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The Great Stupa at Sanchi is not penetrable; it is a solid mass, like a sculpture, and less like architecture, which has internal spaces.

Composition and Construction of the Stupa

- The mound of the Great Stupa is a hemisphere created with layers of masonry. At its top is a peculiar square railing, the *harmika*, at the center of which sits a three-tiered parasol-like element. A stone balustrade surrounds the structure, protecting and separating the sacred space. Four elaborate gates, called *toranas*, are placed at the four cardinal points of the compass.
- Each *torana* consists of two square pillars connected by three gently arching architraves, or parallel beams. The gateways are completely covered with superb relief sculpture showing scenes from the Buddha's life. Exuberantly carved figures, such as the *yakshis*, or female tree spirits, support the architraves.
- Double flights of stairs lead up to the plinth and the processional pathway. On that level, visitors can walk in a circle around the

stupa. This circumambulation is a common ritual performed by pilgrims at Buddhist and Hindu shrines and elsewhere.

- The Great Stupa at Sanchi wasn't all built at once but in various stages that coincided with developments in Indian religion and society. The first version was built by the emperor Ashoka the Great in the 3rd century B.C. The stupa was subsequently enlarged to double its initial size during the reign of another king of the succeeding Śunga dynasty. The *toranas*, or ceremonial gateways, were added in 50–25 B.C. or possibly later.
- The dome of the stupa is a totally abstract cosmic symbol, but interestingly, it is juxtaposed with four gateways that are a riot of designs and narrative art. The *toranas* are full of figures, animals, landscapes, and allusions to the life and doctrines of Buddha. They tell actual stories from the life of Buddha and show scenes of contemporary life in a detailed, realistic, and practical style. We could almost describe them as chatty.
 - The narrative sequences are framed by decorative elements taken from nature, such as flowers and trees. The reliefs have great ornamental charm, especially the flora and fauna, such as the elephants on the columns.
 - In effect, these gateways have more in common in terms of style and content with the Column of Trajan than they do with the stupa to which they belong. They even share the shallow perspective for showing people and landscapes.
 - We might say that the stupa itself is more comparable to the Ziggurat of Ur and the gateways are more like Trajan's narrative and the Parthenon frieze. We have a solid sculptural mass contrasted with narrative relief. In addition, the gateways at Sanchi are penetrable by people, but the stupa is not.
 - One aspect of Indian art that becomes apparent in the *toranas* is that the Indian aesthetic allowed for no vacuum in space. The ornament runs riot. It's a stylistic choice that is emblematic

of the culture, which shows a preference for, and constant engagement with, people and stimuli.

The *Toranas*

- Each of the gates was modeled on wooden forerunners; thus, the stonecutters still carved them as if they were wood. The architrave's triple beams are lightened both by their curvature and the space between them, which is punctuated by vertical struts. All are decorated in relief.
- The beams form a perfect space—a register—for an unfolding narrative. The south gate was the first to be built and was the primary entrance. It begins the narrative with an account of Buddha's birth and scenes from Ashoka's life.
- The square pillars supporting these gates are some of the finest examples of decorative patterning in Indian art. Each face of each column has a different pattern; some of these run riot with flowers, vines, and the abundance of life that grows from the earth and waters.
- At the top of each of these pillars is a capital consisting of a set of four lions, elephants, or pot-bellied dwarves. These charming capitals support the architrave and may have been influenced by column designs from Persia.
- On the outside of the capitals, supporting the beams' extensions, can be found beautiful, fertile, and full-figured *Salabanjika*, or *yakshis*. There were six of these, but many have been lost, as has the wheel of dharma that sat at the very top of the gates.
 - The *yakshi* is a spirit of nature, and she has the natural grace of a dancer as she poses elegantly in the tree branches. The tree itself is also an important symbol of nature, and it can be seen as an outgrowth of the scene below—the column's unfolding vines.
 - The vines, the *yakshis*, and the plant motifs are a sort of border or frame for the narrative stories in relief.

- These kinds of images combining plant and female fertility are almost universal. Recall, for example, the symbolic rosette of Ishtar as a plant representing fecundity. The images at Sanchi visually invoke the procreative powers of a young woman, particularly when she's shown with these exaggerated curves.
- The north gate is intended as the main gate. It has elephant capitals, and elephants appear as struts between the lowest beams and on the relief at the top. Elephants, being the largest land mammal and native to India, were both useful in war and symbolic. The Buddha himself was said to be the result of the white elephant appearing in his mother's dream, and his birth is depicted here.
 - Another interesting scene depicts the Buddha's leaving of this world: His stupa is garlanded with flowers, a balustrade like the real one at Sanchi is represented, and worshipers cling to or kneel at the stupa.
 - The northern gateway also shows what an early urban center in India might have been like. We see a city gateway and Gautama Buddha leaving the gate with his procession.
 - Other scenes on the north gateway illustrate the *Jatakas*, or fables, that reinforced Buddhist doctrine and values.
- The east gateway has scenes showing the Buddha in the jungle being worshiped by animals. He is represented by a tree, because the scene takes place after his enlightenment.
 - On the arch below, elephants worship at the departed Buddha's stupa and bring garlands to it.
 - One of the most famous scenes on the front of the gateway shows the Bodhi tree, a symbol of enlightenment, surrounded by a pavilion and a balustrade rather like the real one at Sanchi.
- Another scene on the north pillar shows the Buddha returning to Kapilavastu in a royal procession. Behind the moving procession,

we can see two multistoried buildings with wooden balconies, out of which people peer at the procession.

- On the east gate, we see the dream that the Buddha's mother had when she was foretold of his birth. Supposedly, the white elephant tapped her on the belly with a lotus blossom, and she became pregnant. Another fascinating scene is the miracle of the Buddha vanquishing a many-headed serpent appearing in the fire temple.
- The southern gateway's interior middle arch illustrates a scene from the *Jatakas*. These are tales from the Buddha's past lives that are meant to illustrate virtues or faults and, thus, encourage good behavior.
- The western gateway's arches have some other informative scenes from the life and teachings of the Buddha. One portrays the Buddha as the wheel of dharma, which has been set in motion. That is interpreted to mean that the Buddha has become a teacher: He has been preaching and taking disciples in order to spread his teachings of the Four Noble Truths.
- The western gateway's interior view shows the "war of the relics"—battles that almost took place over the disposition of the ashes of the Buddha.
- All these didactic stories—the *Jatakas*, the story of the Buddha's renouncing worldly things and achieving enlightenment—serve an important purpose.
 - The pilgrims who came to this monument had, on the one hand, a pleasurable sensory experience of walking in a procession and circumambulating the stupa, of praying and contemplating the huge mass as an abstraction of both the Buddha and the cosmos.
 - On the other hand, when they walked through the gates, they would have had a visual and intellectual experience, as well. They would see these narratives and understand them as the

biography of the Buddha. They were being encouraged to emulate Buddha's life and good deeds.

- If the pilgrims followed in Buddha's path, they would also feel happiness and pleasure in their accomplishments and their lives. In a sense, the reliefs were a form of indoctrination, a reminder to follow the path set before them by the Buddha.
- Finally, the reliefs provide a history of the religion.
- This type of art, which tells the biographies of gods and holy people and the stories associated with religion, exists elsewhere, of course. We saw it in the pediments at the Parthenon, and we see it in the paintings, altarpieces, and Gothic cathedrals that record the story of Christianity.

Suggested Reading

Hawkes and Shimada, *Buddhist Stupas in South Asia*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does the form of this stupa compare to other “artificial mountains” that we have seen in use as holy places?
2. How important do you think the role of pilgrimage to a stupa was in the life of a Buddhist? How does the artwork reflect the aims of a pilgrimage?

Borobudur—Ancient Buddhist Stupa

Lecture 25

The Buddha was born in what is today Nepal, but his philosophy and teachings spread across India and far beyond. Buddhism probably reached the shores of Java in the first few centuries A.D. Javanese Buddhism gravitated to the Mahayana form, which had a rich pantheon of buddhas and bodhisattvas. This diverse pantheon found expression in art and architecture, most grandly in the stupa Borobudur, where the carvings in relief give the lengthiest visual account of the Buddha's life and teachings. Planning and creating this monument required an enormous expenditure of labor. It was built during the 8th and 9th centuries A.D., and some say it took as many as 75 years to finish!

The Stupa in Indonesia

- It wasn't just religion that traveled to Indonesia from India. The art, crafts, styles, and architecture from India had a profound influence, too, and there was trade in both directions. Indonesia has a culture rich in art and imagination and an admirable focus on creativity. Many new ideas and technologies reached these islands, and many art forms were adopted but given a unique cultural stamp.
- The form of the stupa—a mountain associated with deities and the cosmos—has universal appeal. Thus, we find that this specific Buddhist form made its way to central Java to appear there in a unique iteration. Borobudur is both a stupa and a cosmic mountain—Mount Meru, the sacred world mountain—with a spiritual quest embodied within it.
- The origin of the name of the monument, Borobudur, is not agreed upon. But it has been read as the second part of “the mountain of the accumulation of virtue in the ten stages of the bodhisattva.” This name appears to refer to the architecture of Borobudur as a mountain of 10 terraces. It is, then, a mystical diagram of the cosmos.



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Borobudur includes 504 sculptures of the Buddha, 72 of which are placed in the hollow, trellised, bell-shaped forms on the circular terraces at the top of the monument.

- The sides are oriented to the cardinal directions. The topmost stupa signifies the *axis mundi*, or the center of the earth. When visitors climb the terraces, they reenact a journey of the soul from the earthly world of desires to the realm of spiritual perfection, that of the Buddha.
- The Borobudur is essentially a low, complex, stepped pyramid, not the smooth, round dome we saw at Sanchi. Also unlike Sanchi, visitors can climb to the top at Borobudur, although this mound, too, is not meant to have interior accessibility.
- The base of the stupa is a broad, flat terrace that follows the complex, indented shape of the narrower terraces above it, of which there are five. This wide base was suited to the circumambulation of pilgrims, just like the circular passage with a railing at Sanchi, except the terraces here are square, not round.

- There are four central staircases at Borobudur that cut through the center of each side and pass through elaborate corbelled gateways that have monstrous kala heads created as apotropaic devices—guardians meant to ward off evil.
- The meaning of Borobudur is reflected by its plan: The 10 levels represent the 10 stages of the bodhisattva, or the Buddhist path to nirvana. Those who follow this path can learn how to reach nirvana.

The Levels of Borobudur

- The square base of six terraces is considered to be the sphere of desire—*kamadhatu*—or the most earthly of the three spheres of Borobudur. The second sphere is on the middle level and is considered the sphere of form—*rupadhatu*—while the top is the sphere of formlessness—*arupadhatu*. As they climb the levels, pilgrims move from the basest themes to the more exalted ones, leading ultimately to the heavens, or nirvana, exemplified by the crowning stupa at the top. This crowning stupa is solid and has no image at all.
- Relief carvings adorn the lowest levels of Borobudur, showing scenes from the life of the Buddha and his disciples and from the *Jatakas*. These scenes are sculpted on the walls of the stupa and the interior of the balustrade, which forms a high stone railing. Visitors are enclosed and surrounded by figures in relief.
- On the three circular terraces at the top, all representational reliefs stop. Visitors are in the open air, with a clear and distant view of the beautiful valley and mountain range beyond. There is a sense of release from the earthly realm below.
 - On the three highest levels, we see figures of the Buddha enclosed in bell-shaped, perforated stone forms.
 - The Buddha within each of these bells is seated, and each makes a gesture with a particular meaning.

- The Buddha images are serene, still, softly modeled, and naturalistic. They are removed from the hubbub of ordinary existence.

The Borobudur Reliefs

- At the very bottom of the monument, there is a “hidden foot” that has outer walls carved with scenes of earthly existence. These include scenes of people doing good and evil and getting the rewards or punishment they deserve.
- As we continue upward, we come to the area with more visible and lengthy narrative reliefs. A cycle of scenes tells the story of a prince who became a bodhisattva, and we find scenes from the *Jatakas*. There are scenes from the life of Buddha when he was Prince Siddharta, and more showing the seekers of higher wisdom of the Buddha.
- Sculptural images of Buddha reside in niches on the inner side of the monument. The niches’ arches are topped with a pointed element. Each niche is crowned by a spire, which adds to the feeling of upward lift of the stupa.
- In general, the carvings are in a naturalistic high relief and are incredibly detailed. They don’t form a cycle of coherent, chronological narrative as we would envision it in the West. Rather, they are a complex series of different stories that illustrate lessons for the pilgrims. The life of Buddha is illustrated, but only to his first sermon at Benares, after which, it stops.
- We see, for instance, a scene showing the descent of the bodhisattva to earth, where he sits on the lion throne and is borne down from heaven by the pressing mass of 110 dozen gods. They are not kneeling but floating in the clouds. Royal umbrellas and fans round out the relief. The pyramidal structure helps us focus on the main figure, and the tangled mass of beings contrasts with the peaceful isolation of the bodhisattva.

- Another scene is the dream of the birth of the Buddha by Maya, his mother. We also see Queen Maya on her journey home to give birth to her son. She is shown as she rests in her horse-drawn wagon with a huge and colorful entourage. The complexity of this scene gives some sense of the detail of these carvings.
- One later vignette from Buddha's life shows the miracles that occurred before his birth. His father, King Śuddhodana, is said to have experienced 500 young white elephants touching his legs with their trunks as a sign of Buddha's birth.
- We also see the Buddha shaving his head to assume the life of an ascetic. His servants hold his worldly goods, which he has shed. Prince Siddharta left his palace on the back of his faithful horse, Kanthaka. The horse was to die of a broken heart when its master departed and was said to have been reborn as a Brahmin.
- Another cycle of exquisitely carved reliefs shows scenes from the mythic story of Sudhana, a prince, and Manohara, a mythical half-bird/half-woman. We see them sitting on a raised and canopied couch, relaxing while watching dancers and musicians.
- We get a glimpse into this time period in Java from scenes showing a group of students sitting in class; outrigger sailing ships; elaborate architecture; trees, fruits, and flowers; and many animals.
- Finally, we also see a relief showing a stupa. The dome is ornamented with garland swags and a parasol device at the top. The shape of this stupa reflects the topmost element of Borobudur.

The Message of Borobudur

- Borobudur leads us on a path of enlightenment.
 - On the lowest level, the law of karma is carved. We read a narrative of lessons carved in relief that must be inculcated. They essentially perform a function of social control and indoctrination into group values.

- The fables and stories teach us to distinguish right from wrong. They provide concrete examples of self-control and moderation and teach us how to regard life without painful anxiety or suffering, just as the Buddha did.
 - We are enclosed in a narrow space while learning these lessons. Then, when we reach the open terrace, we feel release.
 - We see the Buddha statues, each enclosed in its bell-shaped stupa. The Buddhas in the niches below and here at the zenith inform, instruct, and guide with their nuanced hand gestures. These gestures include signs for benevolence, courage, reason, virtue, and concentration.
 - The 72 Buddhas on the top make a gesture that indicates the turning of the wheel of dharma, or Buddhist law.
 - Borobudur guides us up and into the light, and our bodies take an actual pilgrimage path from ground level to the celestial realm. We experience changes in view and space that produce a transformational feeling.
 - At the top, the sky opens up, and we see the simplicity and beauty of the message. The religious experience of circumambulating, reading the stories and learning from the Buddhas, and reaching the summit is a striking form of meditation on our own lives and the values we hold. Borobudur gives us the chance to reflect on our own conduct and the larger issues of existence.
- The 8th-century Javanese who built Borobudur must have experienced something similar to the pilgrims who came later. Their community was pulled together to focus on this religious and cultural message expressed in stone.
 - This mountain of Borobudur represents a cosmological diagram. It engages the cardinal points, and the *axis mundi* that marks its center

is exactly where the central blank stupa on top stands. It crystallizes the idea of three levels of the cosmos: the underworld (the plinth), the earthly realm (the square terraces), and the celestial realm (the top with its round terraces).

- Borobudur is like Sanchi in that it is essentially a Buddhist monument and uses the domed shape that we saw was customary in India. But Borobudur is also different from the Indian Buddhist expression. It has the stepped terraces, all decorated with elaborate stories, and it allows pilgrims to actually walk to the top to reach nirvana. The profusion of sculptures, reliefs, Buddha statues, and walkways is unlike anything else in India or the world.

Suggested Reading

Hawkes and Shimada, *Buddhist Stupas in South Asia*.

Miksic, et al., *Borobudur*.

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways does Borobudur differ from the Indian stupa?
2. In what ways do you think the sensory experience of climbing the stupa is controlled and manipulated by the architects and sculptors?

Colossal Olmec Heads

Lecture 26

In the late 1930s and 1940s, the archaeologist Matthew Stirling discovered and excavated five colossal stone heads at San Lorenzo, Mexico. Each was carved with a distinctive human face. The style, which was also known from smaller stone sculpture and carved jades, was enigmatic and little understood at the time. Archaeologists argued over whether the sculptures were related to the better known Maya culture and whether they were from an earlier or later date. The discovery set in motion studies of this unusual culture, called the Olmec. Ultimately, 17 colossal Olmec heads were unearthed from the area of Veracruz and Tabasco, Mexico—sculptures that are both artistically superb and unbelievably massive.

Monumental Stone Portraits

- The Olmec heads are all clearly of different individuals. These sculptures have great monumentality, with unforgettable features. For instance, Head 1, the first head unearthed at San Lorenzo, has a strong and powerful face. The features are deeply carved, rounded, and unusually expressive.
 - The man who is portrayed here appears to be in the prime of life, not young, and his look is somewhat forbidding.
 - His lips are quite thick but sensitive, bordered with a double outline. The ends turn downward, which is a characteristic trait of Olmec-style faces. The lips are also asymmetrical, which is something that becomes more apparent with age.
 - The nose is short, broad, and flat, and the nostrils are well defined. The cheeks are sensitively modeled and seem to sag a little over the cheekbones, as they would in a slightly older man. There is a hint of jowls on either side of the chin.



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It is not known whether the Olmec heads were carved as memorials after death or during the lifetimes of their subjects, but surely, any Olmec who saw these sculptures would be awed by the power they convey.

- We get an impression of seriousness and age from the nasolabial folds—the soft indentation from nostril to lips—and from the slightly baggy indentations under the eyes.
- The eyes are deeply set and sharply cut in, with lightly incised irises, all under the shadow of a deep, low brow. They are almond shaped, with an epicanthic fold—a skin fold covering the inner corner of the eye. They are downwardly slanted, as well.
- The face as a whole is broad, flat, and almost square in shape. The back of the head is flattened. The ear flares signify a person of high status.
- If we compare Head 1 to Head 8, we see differences in features and expressions.

- Head 8 has slightly parted lips, and we can see the suggestion of teeth in the mouth. The nose is wider, and the nostrils are shaped differently than those on Head 1.
- The brow is markedly furrowed, and lines are incised in a triangle above the nose, which gives the head a look of worry or concentration.
- The eyes are set at a much steeper downward slope and are slightly crossed, a trait that was valued by the Olmec and appears in other heads.
- These two sculptures are perhaps the most accomplished of the Olmec heads. They are of such enormous size and bear such intense facial expressions that viewers can't help but be intimidated by them. They give off the impression of control, leadership, and perhaps a hint of brutal power. There is no question that each of these heads is a portrait, and although we have no proof, the subjects were probably rulers.
- A comparison of Olmec Head 1 (c. 1400–1000 B.C.) to a portrait of an important ruler from Middle Kingdom Egypt, Senwosret III (c. 1800 B.C.), reveals that both are commanding men.
 - But they also show care and worry in the furrowed brows, heavy-lidded eyes, hollows under the eyes, and diagonal furrows on the cheeks.
 - We know that Senwosret chose to be portrayed in this serious style, which was different from the youthful-looking sculptures of pharaohs before him. He seems to have wanted his populace to believe that he was a somber and imposing leader.
- Head 5 was another found at San Lorenzo and is also considered one of the finest.
 - On top of the brimmed helmet this figure wears is a unique element: Two 3-clawed or taloned feet hang limply down to the brow. They could be jaguar paws or the talons of a

raptorial bird. This element may have implied a name or a lineage symbol.

- This head is almost completely flat on the back, and the earspools are round—rather different from the other heads. Most of the colossal heads wear ancient ballgame helmets. On this one, a woven design on the top of the helmet gives some idea about the material of which it was made.
- This individual has the concerned look of the others, but his features are shallower, the mouth is more natural looking, and the nose is coarser.
- The head's finish also seems to be more pitted than the others, yet its fierce concentration and individuality are clear.

The Olmec Culture

- The Olmec civilization was the first complex society in the Americas. The heartland of the culture was in Mesoamerica, the area from southern Mexico to northern Central America. Specifically, the Olmec developed in what are now the Mexican states of Tabasco and Veracruz.
- Rubber trees grow in this region, and it may well have been the place of origin of the sacred Mesoamerican ballgame cult. Archaeologists have excavated rubber balls in a bog in this area, proving that they were known and used.
- The volcanic Tuxtla Mountains provided the hard basalt stone for the heads and other sculpture. As early as the 2nd millennium B.C., the stone was quarried and sent down the river on rafts to be carved. The carving of basalt and jadeite was done entirely with stone tools. Abrasive sands were used for finishing surfaces, which were often polished to a fine sheen.
- The Olmec culture arose in isolation and is considered one of the six “pristine civilizations” identified by anthropologists. These

civilizations include Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley in Pakistan and India, the Shang dynasty in China, and the Andean Chavín culture in Peru.

- The people who lived on the Gulf of Mexico had a complex, stratified society by about 1500 B.C. They produced the first monumental stone American artworks. They also moved massive amounts of earth and stone to build raised terraces and mounds for cities and temples.
- There were three primary Olmec centers: San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes. The first significant Olmec site and ceremonial center to flower was San Lorenzo. The people here moved 2.2 million tons of earth to erect a capital on an island in a river, sometime between 1800 and 1400 B.C. It was a raised platform of terraces with a system of stone aqueducts. It is thought that the colossal heads were set up here in some sort of arrangement on a ridge.
- The Olmec had a sophisticated spiritual conception of the world, including a cult of the sacred mountain. They attempted to control the forces of nature by the ritual management of water. They also put the human ruler at the center of the cosmos. These beliefs are expressed in artwork.
- The larger art of the Olmec mostly focused on humans, but other pieces depicted animal deities, including jaguars, snakes, caiman, harpy eagles, and monstrous supernaturals—animals conjoined with humans. Olmec artists were even able to show narrative in their sculpture and sometimes used multiple sculptures or stonework in tableaux to represent their beliefs and rituals.
- From somewhat fragmentary evidence, it is believed that the Olmec developed many “firsts” in the Americas: the first glyphic writing, the first calendar, the first dated monuments, and the first pyramids or manmade mountains.

- The Olmec appear to have envisioned the world as a cosmos with four cardinal directions and an *axis mundi*, or world center. This world center was associated with the ruler. As far as we now know, the Olmec had the first such hierarchical or stratified society in the Americas. The cult of the ruler, which we see elsewhere in Mesoamerica, seems to begin here.

Other Mesoamerican Monuments

- Pioneering archaeologists found what is called the San Martín Pajapan Monument 1, an Olmec sculpture, in a rocky hollow near the peak of a volcano in the early 20th century, miles from San Lorenzo. Offerings were still being made to it by villagers.
 - This work ties together many of the ideas presented in Olmec art and religion. It depicts an elite person wearing an elaborate headdress. From a cleft in the head sprouts corn, the mainstay of life.
 - We interpret his unusual posture as the act of a ruler symbolically rendering the *axis mundi*—connecting the three parts of the cosmos.
- Colossal heads were also made in La Venta as that center became powerful around 900 B.C. These heads are not as startlingly real, deeply carved, or fine as those from San Lorenzo, yet they are unmistakably in the same vein as the earlier heads.
- An earthen pyramid, 105 feet high, dominated the center of La Venta. In essence, it represented the sacred mountain. Plazas arranged around it formed gathering places with monumental sculptures. Processions came from the south to this focal point. The center was probably intended for ceremonies that reenacted creation myths and validated the ruler's power as the center of the cosmos.
- Many large stone monuments were found on the plazas, including the throne called Altar 4.
 - This is a large, rectangular block of stone. At the front and center, a sculpturally carved, life-size man emerges by leaning

out of his cave-like niche. He wears an elaborate headdress, and his posture resembles that of the figure found on the mountaintop at San Martín Pajapan.

- He is muscular, and he holds a rope with both hands. The rope continues around the block of stone to the sides. Above him, the projecting stone ledge turns into the gaping maw of a jaguar-like animal.
- This is a conception of the monster maw as a place of origin and emergence; it's an image of a cave within a sacred supernatural mountain.
- We know that this altar was used as a throne, and we also know that such thrones were re-carved, sometimes into colossal heads. That explains why a number of the colossal heads have flat backs. It's possible that a dead ruler would be memorialized by carving his throne into his image. Such monuments would then be set up in the plaza near the pyramid, linking the rulers forever with the rites relating to creation and sustenance of the cosmos.

Suggested Reading

Berrin and Fields, *Olmec: Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico*.

Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do the size and portrait-like qualities of the Olmec heads make them more unusual and compelling than other works we have seen? Do these monuments give you some ideas about the social structure of the Olmec?
2. How do you think these heads might have worked in the setting of a ritual space, such as that at La Venta?

Sarcophagus Cover of Pakal at Palenque

Lecture 27

One of the most magical and hauntingly beautiful archaeological sites in the world sits hidden deep in the rain forest, nestled in the foothills of Chiapas in southern Mexico. It was here, at Palenque, that one of the richest tombs in the New World was discovered, one that has been compared to the find of Tutankhamun's tomb in Egypt. Rather than gold, though, archaeologists found jade masks and extraordinary stone and stucco sculptures that told a story and answered many questions about the history and esoteric beliefs of the ancient Maya. The site of Palenque is the source of works that reach the pinnacle of Maya art and aesthetics—equal to any art in the Old World.

“Reading” Maya Art

- The single most illuminating artwork from Palenque is a massive carved-stone sarcophagus found in the tomb of its greatest king. The carvings tell a story of this Maya king's death and divine resurrection. It presents his royal ancestry and his place in the Maya cosmos. The relief and its temple send us a message of immortality and timelessness.
- Palenque's art and inscriptions, including this sarcophagus cover, played a key role in helping scholars understand much more about the ancient Maya culture in general. Until these were deciphered in the last few decades, much of Maya history and thought was shrouded in mystery.
- The second-longest hieroglyphic inscription known in the Maya world is found at the top of the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, revealing the history—both real and mythical—of this Maya kingdom. The glyphs were not fully deciphered until the last 20 or 30 years.

- Palenque's art and power flourished under the great king K'inich Janaab' Pakal and his sons and successors. Pakal is the best known Maya ruler, and during his exceptionally long reign (615–683), he created much of Palenque's landscape that we see today. In the process, he forged a unique art style that was among the most beautiful, animated, and complex in the New World.

Classic Maya Culture

- The ancient Maya are unique for several reasons: They developed the most complex glyphic writing system in the ancient Americas, and they flowered as a complex society for almost 1,000 years deep in a rain forest habitat.
- The so-called Classic Maya phase ran from about A.D. 250 to A.D. 900. During this time, huge pyramidal structures were created by the Maya, many of which were the temples or funerary monuments of kings. The rich symbolism of the stone carving and the fluidity of line, which is characteristic of the Maya, make these monuments stunningly beautiful.
- Characteristics of Classic Maya culture include the building of monumental stone structures in ceremonial centers; use of stone stelae and altars to record significant events; use of the sacred Long Count (sophisticated dating recorded in hieroglyphs); hieroglyphic inscriptions recording the history and mythology of the Maya; and a central role for a divine king in each polity.
- The Maya belief system was complex, and their ways of expressing ideas in art and writing were sophisticated and sometimes difficult to interpret. Only with the recent decipherment of Maya hieroglyphs it is possible to speak of their political history. We now know the dynasties of kings and names for many city-states in the Maya area.
- The site of Palenque lies on the northern edge of the hills of Chiapas and looks over the vast plain of Tabasco. The name of the ancient city was Lakhama, or "Big Water." This name may reflect

the presence of the Otolum River, which still runs through the central part of Palenque. The kingdom itself was called Baakal, or “Bone Kingdom.”

The Temple of the Inscriptions

- The Temple of the Inscriptions is a rectangular stepped pyramid, set almost at a right angle to the larger, lower palace. On top, the temple is long and low, and its interior is divided into two parallel ranges of rooms. It has a mansard, or hipped, roof, which lightens the load of the walls. The temple is made to look even taller and lighter by a roof comb or crest, made from stone and stucco.
- The temple's rear rooms contain three tablets with lengthy inscriptions on the walls. The tablets tell the story of the Maya rulers of Palenque, from mythic time up to the exploits and death of Pakal in A.D. 683. They also include the son who ruled after him, Kan Bahlam.
- In the inscription, the entire dynastic sequence of Palenque is interwoven with the celebration of rituals honoring Palenque's special divinities, known as the Palenque Triad.
- Pakal, whose royal pedigree was a bit shaky, sought to justify his rule in this inscription and elsewhere. The inscriptions also boasted of Pakal's accomplishments: “restoring order” to the Palenque Triad gods, performing rites that had been neglected before he came to rule, and making Palenque a more powerful polity in the Maya world.
- The most exciting discovery made at Palenque so far is the hidden stairway at the top of the Temple of the Inscriptions. The steep stairway leads into an anteroom before the closed-off crypt. In front of the door of the tomb, the skeletal bones of five sacrificed young people were interred in a masonry box, meant to accompany the ruler on his sacred journey to the underworld.
- The tomb chamber itself was corbel vaulted and decorated in relief. Stucco figures of Pakal's illustrious royal ancestors were sculpted



The story of the ancient city of Lakamha and King Pakal came to light with the decipherment of glyphs in the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque in only the last few decades.

onto the wall and proclaimed his pedigree. But the most curious and unique feature of the tomb chamber was its psychoduct, a tube leading to the topmost level of the temple to allow the deceased's spirit to rise to heaven.

The Sarcophagus Cover

- Pakal is portrayed in the center of the sarcophagus cover in the fetal position, a pose that constitutes the Maya glyph for “baby.” But he’s no ordinary baby; his divinity is marked by the burning torch of K’awiil, a Maya deity associated with kingship.
 - His posterior rests in a solar bowl, which in turn, is placed within a skeletal maw, a place of emergence. The king is emerging, like the sun, from the earth.
 - In other words, Pakal is part of the solar cycle. He is being reborn, or resurrected, and thus, is shown as an infant emerging from this bowl and from the skull beneath it, which reads as a

metaphor for a seed. To the Maya, bones, particularly skulls, were seen as seeds for future life.

- In the center region of the sarcophagus lid, above Pakal, we see a crosslike object, which is a simplified, abstract tree.
 - In the past, this was thought to be the Maya world tree, which figures importantly in Maya creation mythology and ideas about the cosmos.
 - A closer reading of the tree, however, has revealed its name: “Shiny Jeweled Tree.” The cross branches are draped with jade beads, and it has animated blossoms or serpent heads at its ends.
 - This tree was said to have sprouted when Pakal’s reign reached a turning point. One message conveyed by this part of the lid is that Pakal provided wealth and sustenance to his people.
 - This central area of the lid constitutes the earthly realm.
 - On the top of the tree is perched a supernatural bird that played an important role in Maya mythology and symbolized the celestial realm. This celestial symbolism is accentuated by a sky band that runs around the top of the lid and indicates the mythic status of the image.
- Several other metaphors are referenced in the sarcophagus lid. For example, Pakal is likened to the maize god, personified in Maya art as a handsome youth. Thus, on another level, Pakal is part of the agricultural cycle, in which maize grows from seed corn, blossoms, and is cut down, only to renew itself again.
- The metaphor extends to a cycle of sacrifice, as well, because every living thing is part of a cycle of death and renewal. Pakal dies, only to be resurrected as a divinity: both the maize god and the rising sun. He is part of both the agricultural cycle and the solar cycle.

- We have here essentially a diagram of the entire Maya cosmos—underworld, night, day, earth, heavens—that then associates the newborn sun, the young maize god, and preciousness, all with the Maya king Pakal, who is being reborn.
- The theme of rebirth is further supported on the side of the stone sarcophagus in a series showing Pakal's ancestors, all personified as fruit trees. The walls of the tomb depict nine large stucco figures, who are also the ancestors of Pakal. These ancestor reliefs emphasize Pakal's dynastic lineage and the nobility of his line.

The Cross Group

- Pakal's son, K'inich Kan Bahlam II, or Snake Jaguar, was his successor and the one who finished this pyramid after Pakal's death at age 80. Kan Bahlam sought to evoke his father's greatness by building a complex of three smaller pyramids on the other side of Palenque's center in A.D. 692. These temples are known as the Cross Group.
- The Cross Group repeats many of the motifs from Pakal's sarcophagus. The long inscriptions invoke the Maya cosmos and myth. Each temple is devoted to a deity associated with a different realm: sky, water, and cave or underworld, all of which figure importantly in Mesoamerican religion.
- The temples also have an unusual design for Maya buildings. Each includes a rear room—a sanctuary—with a relief tablet that has an inscription and a double portrait of Kan Bahlam. Between his young and older images is symbolism related to each of the gods to which the three temples are dedicated.
- The cross in the center of the Temple of the Cross is similar to the one seen on the lid of Pakal's sarcophagus. It shows a jeweled tree and one of the fantastic celestial birds. The tree rises from a sacred offering bowl with the sun symbol on it, and the skull beneath is probably a metaphor for a seed. Together, these images indicate a

god concerned with the celestial realm, the sky, and solar rebirth. A long inscription seems to confirm this interpretation.

The Quest for Immortality

- Pakal sought to achieve immortality and resurrection by building his temple during his lifetime. The design of the tomb and his sarcophagus lid promised him divinity, as well, by putting him at the center of the Maya cosmos.
- And Pakal achieved his aim, just as the builders of the Great Pyramids in Egypt did: His greatness is acknowledged and admired, and the artworks depicting him are celebrated and debated by more people around the world than ever knew him in his long lifetime.

Suggested Reading

Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica*.

Stone and Zender, *Reading Maya Art*.

Stuart and Stuart, *Palenque: Eternal City of the Maya*.

Questions to Consider

1. How did Pakal communicate his place in the center of the universe and as giver of sustenance in the sarcophagus cover and tomb?
2. How did this tomb and its contents foster the legitimacy and importance of the line of rulers at Palenque?

Carved Stone Lintels of Yaxchilán

Lecture 28

Looming above the banks of the Usumacinta River in southern Chiapas, Mexico is a group of fragmentary ancient stone buildings. This was once the Maya kingdom of Yaxchilán, which reached its peak in the 8th century A.D. It is remote and now long-abandoned. Like Palenque, Yaxchilán had extraordinarily beautiful and evocative artworks. The relief sculptures from Yaxchilán are masterpieces—exquisite, with incredibly complex carving. But the action of these reliefs is shocking: allusions to war, blood sacrifice, hallucinations, and poisonous animals. In this lecture, we will look at a cycle of three stone lintels from this site that gives us insight into the lives of Maya royalty.

Lintel 24

- Three stone lintels from Structure 23 at Yaxchilán feature the actions of a powerful queen, Lady Xook. The lintels give us an extraordinary view into the life and duties of Lady Xook, as well as the dynasty of her husband, the ruler Shield Jaguar. Shield Jaguar lived an unusually long time and ruled Yaxchilán for 60 years.
- The lives of Maya kings and queens are quite different from what we might imagine, because the royals were set apart from society and had specific sacrificial and ritual duties. Of course, the most foreign and shocking of these duties to us is bloodletting or self-sacrifice. Noble women were obligated to let blood from their tongues, and men, from their ears and foreskins.
- In a nighttime scene on one lintel, we see two characters, the ruler and his principal wife. Shield Jaguar leans slightly forward, holding a flaming spear or torch that cuts diagonally across the scene. Lady Xook is pulling a rope through a hole in her tongue; the rope has obsidian blades or thorns attached, and there are intricate blood scrolls on her cheeks that indicate the swirls of blood coming from her mouth.

- Lady Xook is sumptuously dressed, in a woven *huipil*, a sort of Maya dress with elaborate weaving. She seems to be wearing a cape, which has a Maya sky band woven into it. The ends of the textile are indicated in minute detail; they consist of a fringe of tassels with pearls attached.
- She also wears thick cuff bracelets of jade bracelets, an ornate headdress, and a heavy jade necklace and earrings. The woven fabric of her *huipil* pools at the bottom right.
- Lady Xook is engaged here in one of the most sacred duties of the Maya elite: self-sacrifice, using her own blood to appease the gods. The gods had created humanity with their own flesh; thus, they needed to be honored by a reciprocal sacrifice that humans performed for them. The blood provided that sacrifice, and the pain was important, too.
- In this act of self-mortification, Lady Xook is actually inducing an altered state that will assist her in entering a hallucinogenic trance. A burnt offering in a bowl provides the smoke that induces the vision.
- Shield Jaguar is wearing jade cuffs and a beaded necklace, which like Lady Xook's, has a depiction of the sun's face in the center.
 - His cape is knotted at his throat, and he wears a rope around it that signifies he will soon be letting blood, as well.
 - Shield Jaguar also wears jaguar-pelt sandals, elaborately tied at the ankle, and he has decorative jade ornaments below his knees.
 - His headdress has an elegant set of feathers with a shrunken head mounted in the front. Even as grim a detail as this is treated with the same fluidity of carving as the rest. The detail and depth of the relief give this lintel a masterful and unmatched visual drama.

- Lady Xook's headdress is quite different from her husband's; it has squarish elements and a goggle-like feature that scholars associate with a great city to the north, Teotihuacán. This city was often invoked in Maya art as a symbol of power and legitimate rule.
- The amazingly high relief is admired for its elegance and attention to detail, as we see in Lady Xook's hands. Her gestures are so expressive that it's difficult to remember that the carving was made in stone, not clay.
- At the base of the relief is what scholars believe to be a codex covered in jaguar pelt. Codices were Maya books, painted on fig-tree paper, that were important in religious rituals. Unfortunately, all the known books of the Classic Maya were burned by Spanish bishops in the 16th century.
- The inscription in Maya hieroglyphs at the top is deeply carved. The inscription labels the king and says that the events depicted occurred in the year we would call A.D. 709. We are fairly sure that Lady Xook herself commissioned the set of lintels and that they date to around A.D. 725.



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The lintels of Yaxchilán are not the usual stuff of Western art history; they constitute a narrative that shows us some of the most meaningful moments in the life of a royal Maya couple.

Lintel 25

- The fascinating scene on lintel 25 shows how Lady Xook has conjured a vision. She has just let blood and perhaps even taken a hallucinogenic substance. She is in a trance state. According to the

inscription, she is celebrating the accession of her husband to the throne in 681.

- The vision conjured by Lady Xook is fantastic: a gigantic, double-headed centipede from whose maw a warrior goddess emerges. This supernatural apparition points her spear directly at Lady Xook's forehead. The scene is dramatic, tense, and even more electrifying than the scene of bloodletting.
- Two bowls tell us that Lady Xook has burned blood offerings. The smoke from these burnt offerings was thought to lead to visions. The curving element behind the undulating centipede is supposed to be that smoke and even contains within it the Maya glyph for "black."
- The head that emerges from the monster's maw is now thought to be that of Lady Xook herself, conjured up in the guise of the warrior goddess Ixik Yohl.
 - This goddess was associated with Teotihuacán in central Mexico and with war, as we can tell from her rather aggressive stance.
 - The goddess wears a jaguar headdress and balances a skull and skeletal serpent on her right wrist. Lady Xook's vision seems to intimate the coming of war.
- Originally, the double-headed creature in Lady Xook's vision was thought to be a "vision serpent," perhaps one of the venomous snakes that live in the rain forest inhabited by the Maya. Now that the glyphs have been deciphered more accurately, it seems that the creature might be a giant double-headed centipede.
 - A large centipede called the *Scolopendra gigantea* is native to the forests of Mexico. It is an aggressive, carnivorous creature that can grow up to 30 centimeters long.
 - The fact that the centipede is shown with two heads on the lintel stems from its confusing physical form in nature. The rear legs of this centipede are large and look a bit like a mirror image of the real head of the creature.

- Some scholars have seen in this centipede a sort of dragon monster, a creature combining both snake and centipede elements. Whatever animal is depicted here, the notion of compelling power wrapped up in a nocturnal, carnivorous, poisonous beast had great potency for the Maya.

Lintel 26

- The final relief in the series again features Lady Xook and her husband, Shield Jaguar. Here, we have both figures facing each other and interacting. It's rare in Maya art to see two figures standing together intimately, and the narrative here seems potent with meaning. The artist, who was apparently foreign to Yaxchilán, even signed the relief.
- It seems that Lady Xook has received a divine message in her vision, and it is one of impending war. She is handing her husband his jaguar helmet. On the eroded lower part of the lintel, she also bears his shield. The message from her vision has defined the path they must tread: He must proceed with his battle.
- The flower band in the hair of Shield Jaguar is crisply defined; the feathers in his hair are likewise elegantly curved and naturalistic. Lady Xook looks contemplative as she bears the jaguar helmet, and her elaborate headdress and garments are carved with great detail. Note also that Shield Jaguar appears to wear quilted cotton armor, and the difference between it and the woven material we have seen elsewhere is quite striking.
- The gesture of the husband toward his wife is refined and almost exaggerated; it seeks to connect the married pair in a sort of intimacy that we don't often see in any ancient artworks. The scene speaks eloquently of the devotion of the husband and even his dependence on his wife. By conducting these autosacrificial and penitential rites, she has played an important role in the mediation between the gods and people.

The End of the Maya

- We should not condemn the Maya for their seemingly strange customs of bloodletting and sacrifice. The notion that mortification of the flesh leads to visions, penitence, and a more devout self is something that we see in Christianity, as well as many other world religions.
- Blood loss, pain, and concentration on the physical can lead to spiritual and altered states, and in the ancient world, such actions took place in the realm of ritual. They were not undertaken lightly but had a purpose: to reach the divine and to communicate with the spirit world.
- By the 8th century A.D., the Maya centers of Yaxchilán and Palenque had reached their apogees and were on the verge of collapse. This was the dazzling moment before war and social and environmental pressures led to the collapse of the elite Maya civilization. The central institution of sacred Maya kingship came to an end.
 - One of the factors in the collapse of this brilliant and expressive culture of the elite Maya was precisely the splendor we have seen. The elite demanded ever-more luxurious lives, more feasting, more expensive gifts of jade and finely painted ceramics, and more beautiful and expansive stone buildings. The burden on the populace and on the environment may have been too much.
 - Deforestation, drought, endless warfare, economic collapse, a change in belief in the divine power of the rulers—all of this may have contributed to the fall of this amazing culture. Of course, there are lessons for us to learn in that. These sophisticated and powerful cities in the central Maya area fell far and fell fast.
 - Just before this end, however, we see a remarkable thing: The artwork of these late urban centers is the most extraordinary, most ornamented, and most sophisticated found in the Maya world or, indeed, all of Mesoamerica.

Suggested Reading

Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica*.

Stone and Zender, *Reading Maya Art*.

Questions to Consider

1. What role do penance and physical pain play in Lady Xook's reliefs and Maya life?
2. How do you think the relationship of Lady Xook and her husband is shown in these reliefs? What else is being shown, beyond the rites and the couple?

Teotihuacán—Temple of the Feathered Serpent

Lecture 29

Teotihuacán, an ancient capital to the north of Mexico City, is the site of two monumental structures: the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon. Also here is an even more mysterious monument: the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, located in a large plaza called the Ciudadela. It is the only structure that survives here that has ornate sculptural decoration. What was this temple for? Why is it so ornately decorated, and what does the decoration mean? There has been a great deal of excavation lately that has turned to solving these enigmas. In this lecture, we'll take a look at the temple and the latest archaeological investigations concerning it.

The City of Teotihuacán (Teo)

- An enormous expenditure of labor was required to create the monuments at Teotihuacán (Teo) in the 1st and 3rd centuries A.D. The Pyramid of the Sun, for example, is larger in mass (though not taller) than the Great Pyramid at Giza. This labor was available because the city of Teo was probably one of the largest in the world, with a population of more than 125,000.
- Teo was a political capital, a ceremonial center, and an important pilgrimage site. It was a planned city, divided into a grid and worked out on a north-south axis that was exactly 15.5 degrees east of astronomical north. This was something new in Mesoamerica, as far as we can tell.
- The city had more than 2,000 apartment complexes that housed families and tradespeople, many from such faraway places as Oaxaca. The complexes of the elite were painted with beautiful murals, which give us some information about the mysterious beliefs of the people of Teo.

- As in some other Mesoamerican cities, the pyramids here were the focal points. The orientation to natural phenomena, such as the mountains, sun, moon, and stars, was of utmost importance. The orientation was, in fact, planned to represent the cosmology of those who lived here—it was a form of sacred geography that celebrated dates, the passage of the sun, the seasons, and so forth.
 - People were meant to walk from the low point in the south, where the Temple of the Feathered Serpent and the Ciudadela stand, up the Street of the Dead to the higher point, the Pyramid of the Moon.
 - The Moon Pyramid actually echoes the shape of the volcano that rises behind it, a sacred peak called Cerro Gordo.
- Up until the end of the 1980s, Teo was thought to be a peaceful, nature-worshipping, grand experiment in cooperative living, a sacred city devoted to ritual. Because there are no fortifications, it seemed that the principal purpose of the city was to be a sacred ceremonial center. Later, these ideas proved to be emphatically untrue.

Human Sacrifice

- From the evidence of recent excavations, the Temple of the Feathered Serpent is believed to contain a royal grave. The skeletons of more than 200 sacrificial victims have been found inside the temple since 1988.
- The bodies were arranged in a cosmogram—an intentional distribution that had cosmic meaning. Many of the sacrifice victims had their arms crossed and bound behind their backs, while others were clearly young men—warriors—who wore necklaces of teeth with pendants consisting of the lower jaws of their victims.
- The excavators believe that these young men were sacrificed as retainers to the important ruler or person for whom this pyramid was built. It's possible that a mass sacrifice took place in the Ciudadela (the ritual plaza) as a show of the power of the rulers.

The Temple Façade

- The Feathered Serpent Pyramid is so named because of its façade, which is peppered with the heads of different kinds of serpents. To this day, no one is exactly sure what they mean or precisely what characters in the cosmos are displayed, but we have no doubt that they make a strong impression.
- The pyramid is partly covered by a newer building, called the Adosada platform, which was built after about A.D. 250–300.
 - Despite that partial destruction, we can tell that the Temple of the Feathered Serpent was built to be exactly square, with its sides measuring 65 meters.
 - In fact, everything was carefully measured out with a unit of 83 centimeters. That unit was used in the other pyramids at Teo and even in the distance between each head of the serpents on the temple.
- The temple façade has the only sculptural decoration at Teo, and it has an important message. One side has repeating heads of snakes, with a stairway in the center. The stairway is decorated with tenoned serpent heads—stone heads that project from the balustrade. Thus, we know that people had access to the top, just as at other sacred step pyramids.
- The architectural style shown is characteristic of Teo; it is called *talud y tablero* because it has a table-like section and another sloping section. On the side of each of the platforms, the series of serpents appears. There are both sculptural tenoned heads that project from the sides and two-dimensional relief carvings that appear beside the heads and below them.
- Note that there are two different kinds of serpents. One is a rather terrifying creature with well-defined teeth and an almost feline, predatory look. It has a short, stubby nose and a spiral where its ears would be. Where the snake's body joins the wall of the pyramid is



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The feathered serpent depicted at Teotihuacán is thought to be a divine creature from the primordial realm, associated with both war and the sacred calendar of the world.

- a sort of flower-like collar or corona of feathers. This is surrounded by what looks like a scaly collar.
- Obsidian inlays may have been placed in the eyes of the serpent and another object in its open mouth.
- The whole façade was painted in red with blue and yellow accents. These colors had meaning, as well.
- The sculptural heads of the feathered serpent alternate with another kind of head. The face of this creature is quite different from the aggressive serpent; it has goggle eyes, a symbol associated with Teo and its rain god, Tlaloc. The animal has a squarish head, with two square teeth and large, round nostrils. It is covered in scales, and some scholars have interpreted it as an abstract version of a crocodile.

- In the relief carving between the projecting heads, notice that there are seashells of different types: clams, conchs, and scallops. These give us a clue that the scene is taking place in a mythical realm and probably relates to mythical origins in the sea.

Symbols of Rulership

- Many scholars now believe that the crocodile-like creature in the reliefs is actually a headdress that is being carried on the back of the feathered serpent. In pre-Columbian America, headdresses were an important insignia of rank and office, and the act of giving a ruler a headdress could be a symbol of divine authority, similar to crowning a king.
- Excavators also think that the feathered serpent was associated with war and sacred sacrifice and was believed to have brought time and the sacred calendar to the world. The fact that the serpent is giving the headdress to the ruler connects the ruler himself with the divine forces of time and creation and ties his accession into the cosmic plan of the universe.
- Another clue that this pyramid might have been built for an accession ceremony of a ruler is the fact that so many sacrificed young male warriors were found within it. In Mesoamerica (and sometimes elsewhere), the major rites in the life of a ruler were marked by ritual human sacrifice.

The Feathered Serpent

- The feathered serpent is a god and symbol seen over an extended time horizon in Mesoamerica. The first clear example is Stela 19 from the Olmec people at La Venta. This image is rather natural looking compared to those at Teo.
 - The serpent here is clearly a rattlesnake; it seems to envelop the figure of an elaborately headdressed and masked man holding a container.
 - The serpent has an angry, fierce look, with his open, fanged mouth and a crest of feathers that marks him as a supernatural.

- Combining the serpent features with bird feathers—connecting the underworld and the heavens—creates a potent creature that has a good deal of symbolic weight. The resulting god is named Quetzalcóatl, the feathered serpent that serves as god of dawn, wind, and the morning star, Venus. He is also strongly associated with war and sacrifice.
- At the Late Maya site of Chichén Itzá (c. A.D. 1000), hungry and hostile-looking serpent columns proclaim the entrance to the Temple of the Warriors. Between them is a stone figure called a Chac Mool, a man on his back, who is meant to hold the sacrificial hearts of victims on his stomach.
- Quetzalcóatl played an important part in the mythology of the later cultures of Mesoamerica, particularly in the Aztec Empire, which was at its height when the Spanish conquistadors landed at Veracruz in 1519.
 - The priests, who eventually tried to convert all the Indians of Mexico, recorded many of the Aztec signs and customs. This historical evidence provides some clues for interpreting earlier American art.
 - Teotihuacán, however, came so much earlier that we don't have a great deal of certainty about its symbols and customs. The city remains one of the most mysterious cultures in the Americas. We are just beginning to understand what some of the symbols of the Teotihuacáños meant—messages of power, human blood, and human sacrifice told with animal metaphors and enigmatic signs.

Suggested Reading

Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do you think the façade of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent conveyed the power and legitimacy of the ruler and the state of Teotihuacán? How does the temple fit in with the architecture of the rest of Teotihuacán?
2. Why do you think the state of Teotihuacán chose to veil its messages in metaphor, particularly using animals? Can you think of any parallels in what we have seen in previous lectures?

Colossal Stone Statue of Coatlicue

Lecture 30

The city of Tenochtitlán was once home to one of the world's largest empires—and one of the most creative and artistic: the Aztec. Aztec art has some of the most visually rich, most skilled, and complex stone carving ever seen in the world. Yet the intricacy of the surfaces and the density of information packed into this carving make it seem strange to Westerners. No single sculpture exemplifies the qualities of the Aztec Empire as does the colossal statue of Coatlicue, the goddess known as Serpent Skirt or Snakes-Her-Skirt. In this lecture, we'll explore what this sculpture is thought to have meant and how it fit into the myths of Aztec civilization.

Description of Coatlicue

- In terms of provoking visceral reactions, few sculptures can compare to the approximately 8-foot-tall Coatlicue. The carvings on this statue include a potent mix of snakes, skulls, and severed body parts. She is an amalgamation of different animal and human parts—essentially, a deity who is a monster.
 - Such an amalgamation is a hallmark of supernaturals in almost every culture around the world. The most powerful and potent animal parts are used in such figures to communicate a message.
 - The statue of Coatlicue conveys a message relating to the power of the underworld, the earth, death, birth, life, and regeneration.
- The head of Coatlicue is formed by two serpent heads shown in profile, facing each other as they emerge out of the neck of the monstrous goddess. Each serpent head joins and mirrors the other.
 - We can make out the profile view of two large, curved-back fangs for each snake, along with the frontal view of the flickering, bifurcated tongue they share.

- The eyes are blank and, thus, seem cold and threatening. We can see the nostrils and even the elaborate diamond pattern that covers the two rattlesnakes.
 - In a sophisticated visual pun, the two serpent heads unite to create an illusory frontal head that has a single tongue extending from its mouth.
 - The snakes here are meant to represent blood gushing out of the neck of this creation. In other words, Coatlicue has just been beheaded; she is shown at the dramatic moment of death.
 - Note, too, that her arms have also been cut off. Instead of shoulders, she has frontal rattlesnake heads emerging from the place where her arms should be.
- In the center of the sculpture's chest, we can see bare flesh and a sort of macabre décolletage. She has two hanging, flat, pendulous breasts that are partly hidden by a gruesome necklace of severed human hands and hearts. The breasts and severed hands are rendered in a natural manner, with natural palm lines and collarbones indicated. The center, or pendant, of the necklace consists of a human skull.
 - Coatlicue's skirt consists of diamond-patterned, intertwined rattlesnakes, their heads descending to the hem. These are not just surface patterns but thick, writhing, three-dimensional serpent shapes.
 - The back of the sculpture is just as complexly and beautifully carved as the front, with another large skull, hearts, severed hands, and even more writhing snakes. Seen from the side, she has a pyramidal shape.
 - We know that women and goddesses could be identified by the patterns on their skirts, and a skirt carved with such lavish detail would seem to be a clear marker of identity. However, there are other potential identifications for this sculpture, as well as the

possibility that she represents a merging of several related deities.

- Below the skirt's sharply cut-in hem, we can see two beastly legs that end in claws. The feet are grotesquely enormous, and the claws are intimidating. Carved on the bottom of the sculpture is a crouching deity in the threatening position of an earth monster.



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- The goddess here is much more than a beast! She is the essence of creation and destruction, of the dualities of birth and life.
 - The snakes represent both the earth and regeneration (because of the shedding of their skins). The claws of predators and fangs of poison represent the destructive power of the earth.
 - She is the mother who gives birth, but according to myth, she also collects the bodies of the dead. She consumes all and is monstrous and aggressive in reclaiming the dead. She is both victim and devourer—of the sacrifices she demanded.
 - Coatlicue represents a polarity of powers. She's both frightening and motherly. She feeds and she destroys. The Aztecs must have had a rather equivocal or ambivalent view of women and the gods of creation.

Coatlicue may be one of the goddesses who martyred themselves to provide humans with the sun, enabling the crops to grow and, indeed, all life to exist.

The Mythology of Coatlicue

- The myth of origin of the Aztecs holds that their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, was magically conceived when the mother goddess, Coatlicue, was sweeping out a temple. She found and tucked a ball of feathers in her bosom and became pregnant. Her children, led by her daughter Coyolxauhqui, were shocked and outraged by this embarrassing pregnancy and plotted to kill her.
- When the children attacked Coatlicue (at the top of Mount Coatepec, or Snake Mountain), the young god Huitzilopochtli emerged fully armed from her womb and fought his siblings. He beheaded Coyolxauhqui, rolled her body down the mountain, and threw her head into the sky, where it became the moon. After that, he killed his other 400 brothers and sisters.
- This myth has an additional meaning besides being the story of the birth of the Aztec patron god. It can be interpreted as a metaphor for the sun (Huitzilopochtli) overcoming the moon (Coyolxauhqui) and the stars (the siblings).
- This version of the myth was thought to be encoded in the main temple of the Aztecs, Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlán. The snakes sculpted at the bottom of the temple would seem to imply that this was the mythical Mount Coatepec. Even more interestingly, a sculpture of the dismembered goddess Coyolxauhqui was found at the temple in 1978.
 - Coyolxauhqui, also known as She of the Golden Bells or Bells-Her-Face, is represented on a huge sculpted-stone disk with her severed body parts depicted in pinwheel fashion.
 - This disk served as a metaphor for the moon, and its position at the base of the temple stairs served another purpose: The victims who were sacrificed at the top of the temple were rolled down the stairs, and their bodies landed on the disk. This recapitulated the creation myth and cast the victims as actors in the reenactment of the myth.

- Another myth concerning the earth deity Coatlicue has been considered lately for a different explanation of this statue. This version actually explains much of the Aztec rationale behind human sacrifice.
 - We know that the statue of Coatlicue probably stood within the precincts of the sacred city center. Fragments of a few similar colossal statues were found, as well.
 - In this other myth, five or so primordial creator goddesses sacrificed themselves—by throwing themselves into a fire—in order to create the sun and to set it into motion. They made this sacrifice for humanity—to create the universe.
 - This theory is supported by the figure of the splayed, personified earth deity on the underside of the statue, with the date 1 Rabbit inscribed in the headdress. This is the Aztec name of the year in which the sky and earth were separated by the gods to create the universe.
 - This sacrifice of the gods set in motion a debt that humans were meant to repay with blood and lives. The sun needed the hearts and blood of humans to continue its motion in the sky; otherwise, it would grow weak and die. Sacrifice was necessary, just as the primordial female deities had sacrificed themselves to set the sun in motion.
- We have two theories about the myth that surrounds Coatlicue's statue, but in either case, we know that the frightening aspects of the colossal Aztec statues were meant to remind the populace of the power and ferocity of the gods and the debt humanity owed to these gods.

The Context of Coatlicue

- Originally, this statue was part of a set, placed around the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlán. As it was with the Olmec millennia before, the context of the sculpture was important; it helped remind the viewer of the myths of the gods of creation and destruction.

- The colossal sculptures figured into a cosmic vision that involved the sun and moon, the earth, and the forces of nature. The directions were also important; the Templo Mayor was set up as a double temple situated according to the sun's rising and setting in season.
- Coatlicue and similar statues also received offerings. In the Florentine Codex, a painted book of the 16th century, a drawing of a similar statue of a monstrous-looking deity shows that offerings of blood were deposited on her head and surface. Modern tests have found the remains of albumin and blood proteins on Aztec statues. The reason the Aztecs made such offerings was, of course, that they believed their world would be destroyed if they stopped.

Western Reactions to Aztec Art

- The discovery of Aztec art in the early 1500s caused a degree of excitement and shock among Europeans. On viewing some of the artworks sent back by Hernán Cortés, the German artist Albrecht Dürer said, "I have seen nothing that rejoiced my heart so much as these things."
- The skill and artistry involved in the artworks of the Americas was heralded by those who understood it. It also seemed to be remarkably complex, with different styles.
 - Among the Aztecs alone, there was a realistic and natural style in some works, such as those depicting serpents, grasshoppers, and other animals.
 - But others, like our statue of Coatlicue, were much more difficult to interpret—more abstract and full of symbolism requiring explanation.
- We might think it's strange to depict the terrifying aspects of life and death in a goddess, but that's not the case in many cultures.
 - Recall, for example, that the "Queen of the Night" from Babylon (c. 1800 B.C.) has the owl talons of the underworld and the wings of a raptor, yet her alluring body invokes fertility.

- We note a similar combination of the destructive forces of the earth with the more positive forces of birth and regeneration in both Ishtar and Aphrodite.
- The association of female deities with both life and death is something that occurs across the ancient world, but it finds its greatest and most potent visual expression in Aztec sculpture.

Suggested Reading

Pohl and Lyons, *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do you think the combination of creative and destructive forces shown in this statue worked to the benefit of the Aztec state?
2. Why do you think images of goddesses in the Aztec and other cultures we have looked at sometimes emphasize rather gruesome and/or warlike imagery and associations?

Aztec Calendar Stone

Lecture 31

The Aztec Calendar Stone is undoubtedly the most iconic object from pre-Columbian Mexico, yet despite all the attention it has received, it is still an object of mystery. This object, the Piedra del Sol (“Sun Stone”), may appear simple to those not aware of its meaning, but it’s actually quite complex. The stone has nothing to do with an impending apocalypse and is not a calendar for keeping track of time. It does, however, tell a story about the previous Aztec eras that ended in destruction. In this lecture, we’ll look at interpretations of the stone’s meaning and compare it to smaller stones with similar but much simpler images.

The Aztec Empire

- The calendar stone is made of basalt and is about 12 feet in diameter. It weighs about 24 tons. Unlike other Aztec disks of a similar character, it is irregular; it has a ragged stone edge, looking to some as if it were not completed.
 - It is by far the largest and most complex example of this kind of stone sculpture and, indeed, of any Aztec sculpture. It’s the most intricate, beautiful, and detailed enumeration of a cosmic scheme made by any ancient American culture.
 - At the top of the stone is a date—13 Reed—which works out, according to some scholars, to 1479. This date is also associated with the gathering of the gods at Tenochtitlán. The Aztec emperor Axayacatl (r. 1469–1481) was on the throne in this year.
 - Some say that the Calendar Stone was carved for Motecuhzoma II, also known as Montezuma, the last Aztec emperor.
- The Aztec Empire had grown vast and influential in a fairly short period of time before Spanish conquistadors arrived in 1519; it was at its height and seemed to have been in power for a bit more than a century.

- One of the most important aspects of the empire was its alliance with and/or conquest of many different neighboring peoples, from the Pacific Coast to the Gulf of Mexico and in a mosaic of regions down to Oaxaca. These allied and conquered peoples were required to give tribute to the Aztec capital—Tenochtitlán.
 - The economy was based on this tribute; valuable woven cloth, cacao beans, animal pelts, feathers, and jade were all given to the emperor.
 - Part of the tribute also consisted of people who were destined for sacrifice. It's debated exactly who these sacrificial victims were, but many seemed to have come from neighboring regions and from the center of the empire, as well.
 - Ceremonies were held in which the sacrificial humans had specific duties. Different kinds of people were offered to specific gods at designated times.
 - Some high-status captives were offered on a special stone disk—similar to the calendar stone but smaller. These sorts of sacrificial vessels or platforms were termed *cuauhxicalli* in Nahuatl, the Aztec language.
 - The sacrificial victim was stretched with his back over the stone disk and held down by four attendants. A priest made a quick incision in the chest with a special flint knife, reached in, and removed the heart, which was offered as a gift to the sun. Blood would be caught in the central depression that was usually carved into these stones.
 - The large circular stones were set on the horizontal, and the Calendar Stone was most likely meant to be horizontal, as well. We don't know whether the Calendar Stone was used as an actual *cuauhxicalli* or just meant to look like one for symbolic reasons.

- Such stones were also used in gladiatorial contests. A captured warrior would be tethered to a disk of stone and forced to fight an Aztec warrior. This type of combat was part of a religious rite.

Description of the Calendar Stone

- The Calendar Stone has a series of carved concentric circles, some cut much deeper than others. These bands, in turn, are divided into rectangular compartments with smaller motifs inside them.
- In the center, we see a sort of monstrous face, which appears to have its tongue sticking out. But this is not a tongue; it is a sacrificial flint knife, just like the ones used by priests. We also see dots or beads below the neck, which have been interpreted as drops of blood. Large claws that seem to be extending from the face grasp human hearts.
 - This blood and sacrificial imagery seems to imply that this is the face of a god, one who has been decapitated and sacrificed.
 - Scholars do not agree of which god this is meant to portray. It could be the sun god Tonatiuh, the consuming earth monster Tlaltecuhltli, a combination of those two, or even some other deity.
 - As we already know from the Coatlicue statue, the gods were often shown dismembered or as sacrificial victims. Perhaps the message is that the sun has fallen on the earth in a final cataclysm, as some think.
 - The outline of the sign in which the face resides is the glyph for “4 Earthquake,” the date of destruction of the present era. Thus, this central image is of the fifth sun, which means that it relates to the destruction of the world and the end of the current era.
- The central image of the Calendar Stone has four flanges around the face, which are associated with the four previous eras of the

Aztec cosmos. The central date, the final one that is given, is 4 Earthquake. The smaller rectangles or flanges portray the dates of destruction of previous eras.

- In the deeply carved background of the ring, we can also see a few small date glyphs. These dates may refer to actual milestones in Aztec history. For instance, the date 1 Flint may refer to the day that the Mexica tribe left the mythical homeland and set forth to found the new capital, Tenochtitlán.
- A ring of 20 day names circles the central image of the present creation. This is the Mesoamerican ritual calendar, which consisted of a 260-day cycle called the sacred round. This round of days isn't meant to depict actual dates but, rather, to represent the counting of time.



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- The next ring of carvings consists of a repeated design of five dots, called a quincunx, which seems to represent preciousness or jadeite. Set upon this ring are eight rayed emblems, which can be interpreted as rays of the sun. The next ring of images is obscure; it may have some representations of feathers, beads, and/or blood.
- The final encircling ring consists of two thick fire serpents or dragons, called *xiuhcoatl*. The fire serpents' tails are at the top, with their pointed ends framing the date 13 Reed; the serpents encircle the whole disk, and their open maws meet at the bottom of the stone.

The Calendar Stone encoded not only a message about cataclysm and cosmic destruction but also the warlike imagery of the Aztec nation itself.

- Both the animals and the human-looking faces of the deities on this stone all seem quite ferocious. They have open mouths, as if screaming or biting, and threatening teeth. We get the sense of an aggressive, imperial, and warlike culture that believed its very survival depended on war, penance, and tribute to the gods—in the form of human blood and hearts.
- The ragged edges of the stone have some meaning, as well. These unfinished-looking side areas depict the constellations, or star demons, which cause eclipses when they attack the sun. By extension, they were responsible for the death of the sun and the earth. The only way to keep the sun moving in the sky was to feed it human hearts and blood.

The Stone of Tizoc

- We have smaller examples of the *cuauhxicalli*, or sacrificial stone. Probably the most interesting of these is the Stone of Tizoc, an emperor who ruled from 1481 to 1486. Although Tizoc wasn't a particularly successful ruler, his stone is a masterwork of propaganda and cosmic imagery.
- The Stone of Tizoc is proportionally thicker than the Sun Stone and has a much simpler design on its topmost surface. The rayed image is meant to be the solar disk. This piece is similar to the Calendar Stone, although much simplified. There is a carved depression in the center, which was meant to hold the blood of sacrificed warriors.
- On the thick sides of the Stone of Tizoc, we find a sort of cross between a historical and a religious document. There are 15 repeated images of Tizoc; he is shown in the guise of a god and is depicted conquering neighboring towns. In reality, Tizoc had a reputation as a bit of a coward. His monument, however, combines historical events and places with cosmic ones, just like the Calendar Stone.

- On the surface of the sacrificial stone, we have the sun; on the underside, we have the earth monster. Tizoc is depicted in the middle, the earthly realm, holding apart the sun from the earth monster. This device gives the ruler a central role not only in military expansion but in cosmic terms.
- The Calendar Stone is clearly a significant Aztec monument. It combines some historical dates with the cosmic scheme of creation and destruction of the previous eras. It commands, in a sense, the continuation of sacrifices to the sun through its imagery. And it places all these variables in a mandala-like scheme of great complexity.
- Whatever the final exact interpretation of the Calendar Stone is, we can take away from it some interesting knowledge about Mesoamerican culture and its relation to the cosmic scheme of the universe and the deities.
 - Perhaps the sacrificial theme involving the deities was related to controlling the populations of the empire through terror and intimidation. These sorts of images had a powerful effect and served a similar purpose to that of public human sacrifice.
 - We can see the effects of the Aztec heritage in the art of Mexico after the conquest and even today. The depiction of gods at death or in the aftermath of gory sacrifice probably had some influence in later depictions of the sufferings of Christ.
 - The ubiquity of skulls in Mexican art is another influence of pre-Columbian culture. Today, they are even created out of spun sugar for the Day of the Dead.
 - In another nod to the ancient culture of Mexico, the contemporary British artist Damien Hirst created a skull covered entirely in diamonds. According to the artist, it takes its direct inspiration from Aztec sacrificial skulls. Who can imagine what else will take form from this tradition?

Suggested Reading

Pohl and Lyons, *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire*.

Villela and Miller, eds., *The Aztec Calendar Stone*.

Questions to Consider

1. What can you conclude about the Aztec attitude toward the cosmos from the Calendar Stone?
2. How do you think the apocalyptic vision of the Aztecs helped them to dominate other areas and build an empire? How does the Calendar Stone fit into this vision as propaganda?

Calendar Stone Dates

- The first sun, or era of creation, was called 4 Jaguar (956 B.C.–280 B.C.). Giants who lived then were devoured by jaguars because they did not perform their duties to the gods.
- The next era—4 Wind, which lasted for 364 years—had monkey men (in some versions), who were destroyed by hurricanes.
- The next era, 4 Rain, was ruled by the water deity Tlaloc and ended when its denizens, who were near-human beings, were destroyed by a rain of fire and supposedly eaten by turkeys!
- The last date is 4 Water, which was an era destroyed by a 52-year flood; men drowned and may have turned into fish.
- The present creation began on 4 Earthquake (A.D. 1195). Tonatiuh, the sun god, was created for this era. This creation was meant to be stable, and if blood sacrifice was made to the sun god, then it could possibly last forever. But if the blood sacrifices ceased, the world would end in earthquakes—specifically, the death of the sun on the day 4 Earthquake.

Moche Earspools—Miniature Masterpieces

Lecture 32

The tomb of the ruler known as the Lord of Sipán was found at the site of the huacas of Sipán, where three ancient and eroded mudbrick mounds rise from the earth. The Sipán mounds are not natural hills, though they echo the peaks of the Andes in the distance. The mounds were built out of adobe by the people who lived here almost two millennia ago. These adobe platform mounds belonged to a culture—the Moche—that was rich and fascinating but still enigmatic. No writing exists for the Moche; thus, only the artworks give us insight into this unusual culture—an artistically innovative, warlike, sacrificial, and wealthy civilization.

The Tomb of the Lord of Sipán

- The Moche culture, which dominated the north coastal river valleys of Peru from about A.D. 100 to A.D. 800, was named after the Huacas de Moche, two large and now almost destroyed adobe pyramids found in the Moche River valley.
- The Moche culture and art tradition was well known for its sculptural and realistic-looking ceramic vessels. Most of these vessels were made in a curious but characteristic “stirrup-spout” shape, but the majority had been found by looters and lacked any context to tell us how they were used. The realistic style of these ceramics was unusual in the arts of the Andes.
- In the late 1980s, when the archaeologist Walter Alva and his crew dug into what would eventually be named Tomb 1 at Sipán, they found 1,137 of these ceramic pots. The team also found the skeleton of a soldier-guardian, whose feet had been cut off to prevent his leaving.
- Inside the main wooden sarcophagus of this tomb, the excavators found the mummy bundle of an elite individual, probably a ruler, whom they named the Lord of Sipán. His remains were

radiocarbon-dated to about A.D. 290. Several other skeletons—those of humans, a dog, and two llamas—were found buried around him. It seems that some of these people and animals were sacrificed to accompany him in death.

- The metalwork and other goods buried with this man stunned the archaeologists with their opulence and sophistication. Among the finds were a golden headdress, necklaces, scepters, pectorals, “backflaps” of gold and silver, and remains of shells, woven textiles, and feathers. The metalworking techniques exhibited were advanced and aesthetically superb.
- Among the smallest of the tomb artifacts, found to the side of the lord’s head, was a spectacular set of three pairs of earspools—large and heavy jewelry plugs worn in a sizable hole in the ears that distinguished the wearer as a high-ranking person.

Description of the Earspools

- The most amazing of the earspools found was one depicting the Lord of Sipán himself in miniature. It is a microcosm of the Moche world and shows us the symbolic place of this ruler within it. Not only is it a gorgeous, intricate, and skillfully wrought gold and turquoise object, but it is also a window into Moche society, religion, and technical capabilities.
- The earspool is a disk with a three-dimensional frontal image of the figure of a man. He is dressed for warfare and flanked by two smaller and less detailed figures shown in profile.
- The earspool is made of hammered sheet gold and inset with pieces of turquoise. The outermost ring of ornament consists of hollow gold beads soldered to a solid gold rim. Within this gold ring is another ring, composed of small pieces of inlaid turquoise. These concentric rings frame the central image.
- In the center of the ear flare is a thumb-sized man, dressed as a warrior. He wears a hat of turquoise, and on top of that rises a crescent-shaped



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The excavation at Sipán unearthed the most sumptuous tomb ever found in the Americas; the magnificent finds have been compared to those in King Tutankhamun's tomb in Egypt.

crest of gold. To the side of the crescent are two stepped elements, a common motif in Andean art. These are made of sheet gold and are separate from the background.

- The face of the man is wrought three dimensionally. He has rims repeated around his eyes and a fairly prominent nose, to which is attached a crescent-shaped gold nosepiece. This nose ornament is typical of high-status men of the Americas.
- There is also a separately wrought necklace of double-strung gold beads in the shape of owl faces. These owls are important in the symbolic realm of the Andes and are probably associated with night and death. The necklace lies on top of a tunic of turquoise.

- The lord carries two objects in his meticulously modeled hands: a war club in his right fist and a gold shield on his left wrist. Both of these objects can actually be removed from the piece!
- On his belt are two sets of bells on crescent-shaped elements. They are depictions of the decapitator god, a frightening image seen in all sorts of Moche art, from murals to ceramics and metalwork.
- Each of the two smaller figures wears an elaborate tiered-turquoise headdress that is surmounted by a gold crescent similar to the lord's. Their bodies are made of inlaid turquoise pieces, and gold outlines their earspools, necks, and shields.
- This extraordinary miniature of the Lord of Sipán, complete with removable elements, was attached to a background of gold sheeting, which was attached to a core of wood.
- The Moche metalsmiths who made these earspools must have had amazing skill and experience. They needed to master techniques for hammering sheet gold over a core, making hollow gold beads, inlaying stone pieces into a tiny mosaic, creating miniature gold wire, and threading tiny gold beads.

Other Discoveries in the Tomb

- The two other sets of earspools were also astonishing. One set consists of an inlaid mosaic of a spoonbill duck in profile. The duck was probably associated with the fertility of the water and sea, from which the Moche derived much of their protein.
- The other earspool set consists of two deer in profile that are almost completely cut away from the background. The deer are attached to the background only at the hooves, tail, horns, and tongue. Deer also had great symbolic weight for the Moche; they were ritually hunted and could serve as stand-ins for human sacrifices.

- The two henchmen who flank the lord on the earpool were actually buried at his sides in real life. Altogether, there were eight human skeletons in the grave.
- The burial of the Lord of Sipán also contained a large crescent-shaped headdress, double-strung bead necklaces, gold nose ornaments, gold bells with the figure of the decapitator god, and two crescent-shaped knives, called tumi knives. These were religious objects used in sacrificial ceremonies and were frequently represented in Andean art.

The Sacrifice Ceremony

- Until the discovery of the Sipán tombs, sacrificial ceremonies and war narratives represented on Moche pottery were believed to be purely mythical. But at Sipán, these supposedly mythical scenes were shown to have real enactors. The myths had genuine participants in a ceremony—priests, lords, and even animals.
- A series of fine-line drawings on Moche stirrup-spout vessels shows details of what is called the sacrifice ceremony or presentation ceremony. This ceremony is a narrative that is shown on a number of vessels and is known from some now-destroyed murals.
- The theme on Moche pots consists of a prisoner sacrifice scene that is a bit gruesome.
 - In one example, on the left of the lower register, we see an empty litter decorated with trophy heads. On the right are two distinctively dressed individuals who are cutting the throats of bound prisoners, whose blood is spurting out.
 - On the top register on the right is a large priest with a headdress that has an animal face in its center and long streamers. Moving to the left is a priestess with a jester-like cap and braids ending in snake heads. She carries a goblet.
 - In front of the priestess is an owl priest, a man wearing an owl mask. He wears a conical headdress with a crescent and

presents a goblet to the main and largest figure at the left, the warrior priest. The warrior priest takes the goblet from the bird priest and will drink the blood from it, according to other representations.

- The warrior priest has rays that emanate from his head and large metal backflaps. He also wears a conical headdress that has a crescent-shaped crest. He has the same sort of nose ornament as the Lord of Sipán and wears large earspools. There is a spotted dog at his feet.
- All this information in the narrative drawing jibes well with the occupant of Tomb 1 at Sipán. The man buried here either impersonated or was the warrior priest in the drawing. He was buried with all the paraphernalia that role required. Even the spotted dog in the drawing has its analog in the real dog skeleton found in the tomb. The lord also probably drank the sacrificial blood in the goblet.
- We know from many other narrative vases that the Moche engaged in both ritual and real warfare. The winners in Moche ritual battle stripped the losers of their regalia. Then the losers were bled, sacrificed, and possibly dismembered. Real skeletal remains showing such torture and dismemberment of young warriors have been found at Moche sites.
- The rituals of sacrifice took place at the huacas (platform temples) and plazas and were a grand spectacle watched by citizens. The actors in these dramas included the people who were unearthed at Sipán. The artworks involved in this spectacle, such as the mural in the background and the regalia of the enactors, served the message of the ritual and the religion.
- The Greek tradition of painted pottery shows similarity to Moche narrative art in content, medium, and approach.
 - As we saw in an earlier lecture, the Greeks had a penchant for mythic narrative and for showing the heroic deaths of young

warriors. Interestingly, this treatment of heroic death was an important subject in the art of the Moche, as well.

- What we don't see in Moche narratives, however, is any emotion, expressive facial features, or real connection between the characters that people the pottery.
- Still, the similar use of the rounded body of the vessel to show a story that unfolds in time and space is remarkable and not reflected in any other culture in South America.

Suggested Reading

Benson and Cook, eds., *Ritual Sacrifice in Ancient Peru*.

Quilter, *The Moche of Ancient Peru*.

Stone-Miller, *Art of the Andes*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do you think a small piece of body decoration, such as the ear flares we saw in this lecture, reinforced the hierarchy and social order of the Moche?
2. What part does the use of these materials, and the great skill used to work with them, seem to play in Moche society and burials?

Ancient Andean Ceramics

Lecture 33

When we think about the sort of art that communicates messages of the power or strength of a centralized state, we usually think of “big art”: architecture, large reliefs, or huge sculptures. But in the majestic mountains of the Andes and the dry coastal desert that abuts it, a different sort of approach to art and writing was taken. In this area of the world, people produced pottery and textiles—usable objects that were made unique through painting or careful weaving.

Nasca Pottery Vessel: Killer Whale

- The Nasca culture was active during the 1st to 8th centuries A.D. We see a Nasca pottery vessel that is a depiction of a killer whale, or orca. This is not a sculpture in the way we would normally conceive of one; it is actually a pot that could be used for liquids.
- The whale is standing up on two stumpy legs, and a third protrusion allows the bottom of the vessel to rest on a surface. The small bridge handle is barely noticeable amid the riot of colors and decoration, and the spout is understated.
- The creature represented here may be a mythical killer whale. It has large eyes, a hand that seems to hold a weapon, two small feet, and a loincloth-like garment.
- A decorative bordered stripe, with white and dark brown segments, traces the middle body of the animal. To the left of this line are three bearded trophy heads that curve up around the tail. The tradition of taking trophy heads has a long and important history in South America.
- This mythical creature may be a metaphor for human warfare. The orca is a powerful and dangerous predator of the sea. It is an intelligent animal yet can also be unpredictable. The fact that orcas

live in pods and hunt together may not have escaped the notice of groups of Nasca people.

- This vessel is meant to be appreciated as more than a superb art object; it is a statement about supernatural forces and beliefs that existed in the religious and social system of the south coast peoples.



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- Nasca pottery had eight distinct phases, each becoming more abstract.

Some Moche vessels portray human faces that are so specific they could be termed portraits.

This pottery superbly marries the three-dimensional sculptural form with two-dimensional patterns or details, often in bright colors. The complexity of form and decoration works well together on many levels and, of course, imparted a great deal of information to the people who owned the pots.

Moche Pottery

- In their pottery, Moche artists used little color—just cream and reddish-brown—and pursued a more realistic portrayal of nature and humans than did the artists of the south. The Moche are, in many respects, outliers in South American artistic traditions.
- As we saw in the last lecture, Moche potters imparted ideas about religion and ritual in their culture by depicting complicated ceremonies. Such scenes were painted in clay slip to produce what are called fine-line pots. These pots were made over a briefer period of time than the more common sculptural vessels.

- The pots of the Moche did something else that we don't see to a great extent anywhere else in South America: They used motion and narrative, as we saw with the fine-line pot depicting the sacrifice ceremony in the last lecture. The characters on Moche vessels also sometimes showed emotion.
- The stirrup-spout bottle was a characteristic Moche form. One example shows two llamas—a mother and baby—in a dynamic, interactive portrayal. The two figures are shown to have an emotional relationship, and the sculpture gives us a sense of the moment, a quality rarely found in ancient art of the Andes.
- The thousands of vessels of this type included many sculptural representations of animals. These are among the most arresting and compelling of the vessels, especially for Westerners. They seem to record the natural world in all its forms.
 - We find, for example, many sculptural images of birds, such as a condor. The painted decoration in reddish-brown and cream on one example evokes the landscape in which the condor caught its prey.
 - The prey is represented mostly in two dimensions, while the condor itself is fully rounded. This smooth segue into painting or sculpture on the same object is a masterful touch of the Moche and other Andean potters.
- Other animals that appear in pottery include foxes, ducks, owls, sea lions, deer, pumas, and jaguars. In some instances, these animals have human hands or appendages or they attack humans, hinting at a hidden meaning of these sculptures.

Moche Vessel: Puma and Prisoner

- A vessel that is now in the Peabody Museum at Harvard shows two equally large figures, a puma and a man, one brown and one cream. They are cleverly merged into each other in the middle in order to maintain the body of the pot uninterrupted.

- The brown puma with spotted underbelly curves over into the man's compact and scrunched-up figure. The puma's carefully modeled face and stippled cheeks emphasize the fact that it is biting into the neck of the man; even the puma's paw claws at the neck of his victim.
- Clearly, the man is a prisoner: He has a rope around his neck, he is nude, and his hands are tied behind his back. His face is uplifted in anguish; his anxious gaze is toward the sky, and his head is angled away from the attacking puma.
- The man has a distinctive form of face paint: A Maltese cross spreads across his cheeks, chin, and forehead. He may be connected to a Moche deity who is shown on other pots with a similar cross on his nose. The man may be a sacrifice to this deity. We know that the Moche practiced ritual combat, which seemed to end in bleeding and sacrifice of the prisoners.
- This stirrup-spout vessel powerfully conveys the ripping bite of the feline predator, its menace to the hapless prisoner, and the true anguish of the man who must endure this form of torture.
- We don't know whether the Moche actually left people tied up to be attacked by predators, but we have quite a few representations that show either vultures or felines attacking such prisoners.
- Similarly, we see deer, particularly stags, hunted with nets on some Moche vessels. These are ritual hunts. Deer seem to be ritual stand-ins for people, and we see deer "prisoners" with ropes around their necks and the exposed genitals of male humans.
- Clearly, the Moche artists were not just depicting the natural world out of interest in cataloguing it or admiring it. They were, instead, communicating messages about myth, religion, and sacrifice that have taken modern scholars decades to decipher. Even plant forms that appear to be clear replications of nature—potatoes, yucca, squash, or peanuts—in other versions sprout human heads or merge psychedelically into other forms.

- The “moon animal” or decapitator is a feline with a snake tail and a set of scales on its back. In one image, it is holding a decapitated head between its front paws. The rectangular “body” of the pot has a painting of what looks like a feline-headed, thick-bodied snake on it.
- This combination of threatening animal—fanged feline and constricting or biting snake—is arresting. We see many variations on this theme of the decapitator animal. Sometimes it has a nose that is reminiscent of a leaf-nosed bat. It is the manipulation of these parts by Moche artists that elevates these works to the level of sculptural genius.

Portrait Vessels

- Another category of pottery that strikes us most compellingly is the portrait vessel. Such pots seem to depict the faces of real individuals, not masks or generic humans. The Moche were perhaps alone among the Andean artists who chose to portray specific human faces. We still don’t know whether the men depicted were rulers or mythical personages. We can, however, identify consistent features of some subjects shown on multiple vessels.
- In one example, we see a man in his prime, clearly elite, as we can judge by his large, tubular ear plugs and his elaborately decorated and folded head cloth. He even has a spotted war club or mushroom that sprouts from his headdress.
 - The stirrup spout itself on this vessel is sited so that it interferes very little with the portrait.
 - We see a distinctive individual, one who seems to be suppressing a slight smile. He is gazing forthrightly at the viewer, and his brow is slightly furrowed, his wide cheeks are lined, his eyes are deeply set. His nose is large and wide, and he has face paint on the outer third of his face. In back, streamers emerge from his head cloth.

- This is an example, once again, of masterful merging of the three-dimensional, sculptural qualities of the pot with the painted motifs that give us even more information about the person represented here and serve to decorate and enliven the portrait.
- We have a series of portraits of fairly identifiable people, named Cut Lip or Long Nose, depending on their identifying features.
 - These men are shown at different stages of their lives, sometimes even as boys. Interestingly, we also have images of these same high-status individuals—perhaps Moche lords or rulers—as older men, stripped of their ornaments, wearing no head scarf, and appearing as prisoners.
 - We don't know whether these are historical or mythical personages who somehow were led to sacrifice in the end.

Pottery as a Means of Communication

- In the later centuries of Moche culture, artists turned to fine-line drawing as a way of communicating ideas. Such pots require close examination for their message to be understood. In contrast, the earlier sculptural pots could be apprehended and appreciated at a much greater distance.
- Thus, there seems to have been a shift in need to impart more detailed information as the society changed and religious ceremonies either became more complex or needed to be understood by less informed people. It's fascinating to think that pottery could play such an important role in the dissemination of religious imagery!
- The Moche turned this need for communication concerning ritual and myth into one of the greatest genres of art we have seen. This ancient society, using only the humblest of materials, produced mold-made masses of pottery that is equal to some of the most fascinating and expressive work of the Old World.

Suggested Reading

Quilter, *The Moche of Ancient Peru*.

Stone-Miller, *Art of the Andes*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the advantages to using pottery to disseminate ideas and religious or political beliefs? What are the disadvantages?
2. Pottery can be used as a three-dimensional, sculptural sort of medium or a more two-dimensional surface for painting. How successful do you think the Moche potters were at each type? How does their work compare to some of the Greek vase painting we have seen? In what context do you think these types of pottery would be most effective (home, temple, funerary, and so on)?

Ancient Andean Textiles

Lecture 34

Like the Egyptians, the ancient people on the Peruvian coast noticed that the dry sands admirably preserved buried bodies and grave goods. And like the Egyptians, they elaborately wrapped their mummies, winding them in cloth. But the type of cloth used here was quite different than the plain linen usually used in Egypt. In the burials of Paracas, the mummies of high-status people were wrapped in layers of garments so sumptuous and woven in such complex techniques that modern weavers can only marvel at their virtuosity. Fortunately for us, the dry, hot climate of the Paracas Peninsula preserved these textiles so that we can see an amazing number of them today.

Textiles as Wealth

- The Paracas culture thrived in the south coastal areas of Peru from about 700 B.C. to A.D. 200. It was known for its haunting ceramics with somewhat demonic-looking animals, but it was in their weavings that the Paracas people expressed their ideas to a much fuller extent.
- Ritual garments reflected Paracas religion—a shamanistic tradition. In shamanism, a fantastic spirit world exists and can be reached by people in altered states of consciousness. The textiles display a riot of bright colors—yellows, reds, blues, and greens—that burst forth from the cloths and were used in syncopated designs.
- Paracas weavers depicted a number of powerful animals, along with strangely contorted figures composed of bird, monkey, snake, puma, and shark parts. These had strange streamers emanating like tongues from their bodies, at the ends of which dangled trophy heads.
- These cloths represented an important form of wealth to the Paracas people and to all Andean people in general. Using only backstrap looms (or upright looms for tapestry), groups of Andean women

were devoted to spinning, dyeing, and weaving complex cloths. Such labor-intensive weavings were not only valuable goods, but they also communicated values and religious ideas with their symbols.

- In ancient times, in societies that took the form of chiefdoms or early states, sumptuous garments were important to communicate messages of status and exclusivity. In fact, most societies around the world had what are called sumptuary laws—those that restrict certain garments, colors, designs, or accessories to a ruling class.
- Textiles were a form of wealth as valuable as gold in many ancient societies, including the ancient Andean societies of Peru. The weaving process was laborious and difficult, and women were highly trained and devoted to the craft. Myths, religious concepts, social hierarchy, and forces of nature, along with humans, animals, and supernaturals, were represented.

Textile Production

- Cotton is native to Peru, and it was one of the first plants to be exploited by early inhabitants of the coast. One of the earliest forms of technology known from the area is the twining of cotton fibers to make nets in order to catch fish.
- Additionally, the Andes were home to llamas, alpacas, vicuñas, and guanacos—the camelid family of mammals. Llamas and alpacas were domesticated and exploited as beasts of burden, and their soft wool was used for fine garments.
- Living in a harsh landscape, Andean groups had to think collectively and act in the interests of the group for survival. Their societies were tightly organized for the common good; trade and large projects, such as the building of irrigation canals, were undertaken between regions.
- Some of the weavings from Paracas were enormous, and textiles in just one mummy bundle could take from 5,000 to 29,000 hours of



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The Spanish conquistadors arrived in Peru seeking gold in the 1500s, but the first gifts they received from the Inca were intricately woven textiles, considered more valuable to the Andean civilizations.

work to create. Thus, cooperation was key to survival, and a complex hierarchy of workers served to further the goals of the group.

- In Andean artworks, such as pottery and weavings, that social structure of extreme cooperation was reflected with an emphasis on supernatural creatures and abstract forms.
- The Paracas culture focused on group identity, with some degree of standardization in its artwork. Weaving, with its rectilinear grid and repetitive patterns, lends itself well to this approach.
- Armed with this worldview, Paracas people and Andean cultures in general emphasized cycles of life and death, supernatural creatures, and shamans and priests who impersonated powerful animals.

Mummy Bundles

- High-status people were wrapped in beautiful cloths when they died, which indicated their roles in both life and in death. The corpse itself was first tied with ropes in a seated, fetal position. The body in this position was seen as a seed—a fetus or a kernel—waiting to be reborn.
- Offerings, such as shells, animal hides, feathers, staffs, and perhaps gold ornaments, were placed on the body and around it. The body was then seated in a basket, and layers of elaborate cloths were wound around it.
- The bundles of cloth, some of which consisted of matching sets of mantles and loincloths, indicated that the person was important and gave clues to his or her role in society.

Shamanic Figures

- Designs on the embroidered mantles offer clues to the roles and religious beliefs of the Paracas people.
- One spectacular mantle has a red field with clear and colorful embroidered motifs arranged in a checkerboard-like pattern. We see a series of strange, bent-back figures in brilliant colors. Although each figure's color scheme varies from the one next to it, the effect is controlled, not chaotic.
- The figures are thought to be shamans, spiritual specialists who entered a trance and visited the spirit world transformed into animal-human hybrids. Shamans performed cures and could ensure the fertility of the land. They were key to the mystical religious traditions of the Andes.
- Shamans were often shown dancing while in a trance state, frequently after having consumed hallucinogenic substances. The shamanic figures on this mantle are not confined to a single direction, color, or appearance; they are rhythmically opposed and

not entirely symmetrical yet extremely pleasing in their overall pattern of flying, wiggling dynamism.

- One interpretation of these figures is that they have consumed hallucinogenic mushrooms. Another is that the figures are self-sacrificing—ripping their own hearts out of their chests.
- Also seen in Paracas textiles are bird impersonators or shamans who have monkey-like feet, snake staffs, and patterns of trophy heads.

Wari Culture

- A tunic that was created a bit later (c. A.D. 600) by members of the Wari culture shows an equally dazzling but quite different approach to textile design. This tunic was far more than a piece of men's clothing; it was most likely a statement of religious and political control.
- The Wari was an empire of the Peruvian highlands with a highly organized and strict state exerting extreme economic and social control. This culture was at its height in the 6th–8th centuries A.D. Wari art and architecture were bold, based on a rigid rectilinear grid and proclaiming the society's militaristic and organized character.
- This characteristic of control is reflected in the textiles. The Wari people used extraordinarily fine wool (alpaca and llama), which meant that one tunic might have incorporated as much as 6 to 9 miles of yarn! The geometric, abstract forms look almost modern and, in fact, influenced modernist painting.
- Wari weavers used the tapestry technique, which is extremely time-consuming and exact. They also used bright but limited colors and a limited number of geometric patterns. The tunic was the main form of textile, and the cloth was never cut—just slipped on through the neck slit.

- The Lima Tapestry and many other Wari tunics show a series of repeated figures that have been distorted in such a way as to render them almost illegible.
 - The figure most commonly represented is the staff bearer, an image known from the earliest cults of Peru. It can be humanoid, an animal, or a hybrid. Unfortunately, we don't know exactly what it means or the story in which it appears.
 - The staff bearer motifs are almost impossible to read as an actual design. But those who understood the religion and its iconography got the message. Despite its rhythmic, abstract vitality, textiles with this motif actually functioned as encoded documents of religious belief and probably status for the wearer.

The Inca Empire

- The trend over time in the Andes was toward ever-greater abstraction in the textile arts. The Inca Empire carried this to its extreme, not only in its textiles but also in its stonework. The Inca produced abstract, nature-oriented symbols and works, devoid of any figures.
- The Inca came to their greatest power in the 15th century, expanding an empire that extended from approximately Quito in Ecuador about 3,000 miles south, past Santiago, Chile. Inca art that remains today is spare and beautiful and has a completely different aesthetic than, say, the art of Mesoamerica or Europe.
- A tunic belonging to a royal Inca—possibly the emperor himself—has an overall design of numerous square motifs arranged on a grid. These colorful individual designs are called *tokapu*, and only nobles were allowed to wear them. The *tokapu* motifs had meaning, much of which is lost to us today.
- What's so striking about the Andean textiles, particularly the Inca phase, is this: At least 500 years before we in the Western cultural tradition thought of abstract art as a new and exciting development,

an arcane and gorgeous form of abstraction was developed here in the Andes. The people here were isolated from all other civilizations on earth, yet the Andes produced sophisticated, abstract concepts and were virtuosos of many different forms of art.

Suggested Reading

Benson and Cook, *Ritual Sacrifice in Ancient Peru*.

Quilter, *Treasures of the Incas*.

Stone-Miller, *Art of the Andes*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do you think the primacy of textiles affected the style of art in the Andes and, perhaps, even the worldview of the people?
2. How did abstraction and stylization of motifs help communicate messages about religion, status, and control, particularly in the Wari culture and Inca Empire?

What Can We Learn from Ancient Art?

Lecture 35

In these lectures, we've seen a vast array of ancient art—of different styles, cultures, shapes, and media. We can learn many lessons from this study, and these lessons can inform us in our approach to both art and life. As we hurtle toward an increasingly digital and visual world in the 21st century and beyond, we need to understand how humans developed their systems of communication, what visual messages are most effectively conveyed, and what visual cues motivate people to form a more cohesive and positive society. Artworks from the past enlighten us in terms of human development in the visual realm, and they delight us with their imaginative responses to the “human predicament.”

The Place of Humans in the World

- The earliest art didn't emphasize humans or the human-built world. This fact leads us to the idea that humans are not the center of the world. In fact, humans are actually a less predominant subject in art than we in the modern world would think.
- When we look at other cultures that developed apart from the West, such as those in the Americas, we see that dissimilar approaches were taken in the subject matter and expression of art.
 - The Andes, for instance, focused mostly on supernatural creatures and colorful, abstract patterns.
 - The Chinese art we looked at rarely featured humans and was often focused on patterns abstracted from supernatural creatures, such as dragons.
- Starting with Paleolithic European cave painting and on to the Mesopotamian, Chinese, and Andean realms, what we see portrayed most is the natural world and the imagined or supernatural world based on it.



The Greeks and their legacy of depicting humans in art represent an exception to the art of many other cultures, which didn't emphasize humans or the human-built world.

- In this day and age, our tendency is to think of a solely human-based existence, but we are still tightly linked to the animal and natural world. Our dependence on animals and plants is part of our evolutionary toolkit and our consciousness.
 - We are still innately afraid of snakes, for instance (like all primates), and an image of a snake will draw a greater, more visceral, and more emotional response from people than an image of, say, a plate.
 - Thus, snakes and other potent animals figure importantly and potently in the art of every ancient culture.
 - Even rulers must take pains to locate themselves and their powers within a cosmos that emphasizes natural forces;

agriculture; the sun, moon, and stars; the earth's trees; and the animals of each realm—the underworld, the earth, and the sky.

- The quest to perfect the representation of the human body and to value this goal over all others in art seems to be a European obsession that goes back to Greek sculpture. It is not a worldwide focus of art.
 - Certainly, admirable or strong bodies in art were required for kings or elite people in many cultures. But often, the real objective in art was to make a person look larger or bolder than he actually was. Such messages were linked to hierarchy and social organization.

The Role of Beauty in Ancient Art

- We also learn from our study of ancient art that beauty can take many forms. For instance, the finely woven Andean textiles strike us with their colors and abstract patterns much as modern art strikes us today. Though the meaning is different, the aesthetic experience—the pleasure we get—can be the same. Form and color elicit emotional response, even when there is no discernible image from nature.
- Much has been written and thought concerning beauty and aesthetics in art. People today decry the lack of a sense of the “beautiful” in contemporary art. In generations past, some saw “primitive” or “ethnographic” art as somehow crude and unworthy.
 - What we have learned is that artworks elicit responses of pleasure, even when they are not considered “art” in our social group.
 - They have the power to change us, to fascinate us, and to help us understand the connections we have to different and distant cultures.
- Our sense of beauty is, to some extent, an evolutionary inheritance. As neurologists and scientific researchers have noted, our brains respond strongly to visual stimuli, even before consciousness kicks

in. We pay keen attention to visual rhythms, strong contrasts, and borders; objects hidden in busy compositions; and groupings of similar elements.

- Certain properties of art, and of masterpieces in particular, are more pleasing than others. These include strong colors, smoothness or polish and glossiness, cleanness, lack of blemish, precision and fineness, and signs of vigor.
 - As some scholars have noted, these are some of the same qualities that we value as signs of health and vitality in a mate.
 - Hence, many of our most favored art objects are made of materials that reflect these properties: shining gold, polished marble, sumptuous and precisely woven garments, and glowing color in paint or stone.

Artworks as Physical Objects

- All art, in every form, is a physical object. Ancient art started with an object that had a function; through art, that object was elaborated in some way. In modern art, we value painting on a canvas over sculpture. We often ignore three-dimensionality, even when it exists in paintings. This focus reflects a cultural choice—our preference or bias.
- In the past, what we call art consisted mostly of sculptures and decorated objects that had functions: pots for eating and drinking, furniture for temples, coffins for the dead, and so on. Artists did not create art out of pure desire for a means of self-expression. The work of artists was commissioned, usually by elites, and the art that was produced had a purpose, often a religious one.
 - We tend to forget, for instance, that the famous statue of Aphrodite was revered as a cult statue, an image of the divine.
 - Other art objects, such as pottery created by the Greeks or the Moche, conveyed myths and stories of the divine world. They could be examined and appreciated on a more intimate level, but they still propagated religious stories.

- They also had messages about life—morality, spirituality, ritual, and social control—all of which could be reinforced by a visual image.
- Art that wasn't directly religiously inspired often had the purpose of conveying rank and status. This was true of woven textiles, gold and silver ornaments, and other objects.
- To some extent the statement “Art for art’s sake” is also untrue even for the modern art world. No art is made entirely without regard for an audience. Today’s collectors often use obscure and expensive contemporary art as a badge of status, wealth, sophistication, and membership in a particular in-group.

Differences in Ancient and Contemporary Art

- All ancient art had a role to play, a distinct function—religious, ceremonial, or as an identifier of rank. Ancient artworks are more similar to “things” than art as we conceive of it today. But most art of the last few centuries was devoted to religious themes or functions; consider the tradition of Christian art that goes back two millennia!
- What we also see in the ancient world is that the artists were very fine craftsmen. They might be acknowledged as artists or even hailed as the best, but primarily, they were people who were exceptionally good at their craft, whether it was vase painting, metalworking, or marble carving. Further, ancient artists may have been more beholden to a temple or a ruler than to a mass audience.
- In contemporary art circles, the role of the artist is often seen to be provocative, incendiary, or antisocial. In contrast, the messages of ancient art were not individual and antisocial but usually in the service of the group. The art tended to cement social bonds and helped to define rituals.

- Of course, as we've seen, the earliest art is among the most sophisticated, observant, and natural, including the cave art of almost 35,000 years ago.
 - Cave artists used perspective, volumetric shading, and overlapping and even incorporated the natural curves of the cave's walls. Early art of the ancient Near East was very observant and realistic. Later representations become more schematic and formulaic. Animals are often more realistically rendered than humans.
 - We cannot, then, believe that the human mind developed in terms of art and conceptual thinking in the way that was thought until recently: from crude to more skilled, then erupting suddenly into a fully realistic human body. Skill was definitely present at the beginning, and the mind's eye and visual memory seem to have been fully developed quite early on.
- The artworks we have seen are representative of some aspect of their individual cultures. What's interesting to note is that they have different emphases, for instance, on ancestor worship and food preparation in China, on the life of a holy person—Buddha—at Sanchi and Borobudur, or on the resurrection of a king and his attainment of immortal life. This focus on the dead, religious icons, and kings continued into European art for many centuries.

Art and Writing

- Another issue affecting ancient art is the development of writing or signing systems. Art is, after all, a means of visual communication. Some art almost functions like writing. Pictographic and ideographic words in writing systems, such as Egyptian hieroglyphs and Maya glyphs, are sometimes art themselves or just barely separate from it.
- Puns or rebuses can be found in ancient art, such as the Maya sarcophagus of Pakal, where he forms the glyph for “child at the center” as he is reborn. However, with the development of the cuneiform system of writing in the ancient Near East, the dovetailing of writing and image became less pronounced.

- When the populace is mostly illiterate, it is useful to put all sorts of information and signs on religious and other artwork to help the people understand it. Shapes and colors impart meaning. It is also possible to impart more information with relief and drawing than with sculpture.
- Today, we see less relevance in the art of sculpture or relief in architecture, but visuals have made a strong comeback in this age of television and computers. We all now have access to a plethora of images, film, and photographs, and most of our information is presented visually rather than in text. Perhaps the tide is turning back to what we knew from the ancient world.

Suggested Reading

Boardman, *The World of Ancient Art*.

Pasztor, *Thinking with Things*.

Scarre, ed., *The Seventy Wonders of the Ancient World*.

Siliotti, ed., *The Hidden Treasures of Antiquity*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think are the prime differences between what you've seen in ancient art in this course and contemporary art?
2. What do you see as the prime purposes for the creation of art in ancient times?

How Ancient Art Reverberates

Lecture 36

In our first lecture, we looked at Paul Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* This painting borrowed compositions, forms, and themes from ancient art, including themes of fertility, spirituality, and worship; the renewal of life; the quest for knowledge; and the passage of time and encounter with death. In fact, Gauguin packed together in one canvas many of the most salient themes of art we have seen in this course! Ancient art mattered very much to Gauguin and is surprisingly resonant for us today as we struggle with ancient issues: survival, forces of the natural world, forms of government, and questions concerning spirituality and death.

Animal Themes in Ancient Art

- The primary subject of the cave art of Chauvet, France—the earliest known art—was the natural world, specifically animals. The people who painted these ancient mammals were clearly in awe of their power. The animals and the lone depiction of female human genitalia on the stalactite seem to be connected with power and worship of fertility.
- Modern artists have grappled with similar animal themes that hark back to the distant past and the animal symbols of cults. Perhaps most notable in this regard is Picasso's deconstruction and reinterpretation of bulls in a manner that recalls cave art.
- We see a similar preoccupation with animals, especially supernatural ones, and the notion of fertility in the art of the Andes. When we looked at Andean textiles, we saw symbolic creatures illustrating the close connection of the spirit world to the fertility of the earth. Some of these supernatural creatures have the limbs of monkeys, wings of birds, or parts of snakes or felines. Often, they have a series of sprouting beans, a symbol of the fertility of the earth.



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Modern artists' emphasis on animal themes reaches back to ancient depictions of supernatural animals of great power.

- Similarly, the sculptured frieze on the Temple of the Feathered Serpent at Teotihuacán introduced us to a central Mexican cosmos with animals of primordial age and great power. The famous feathered serpent here is associated not just with fertility but possibly with time itself and even the power to crown a ruler.
 - Other powerful images of serpents appear frequently in the art of Americas. For instance, serpent jaws animated the branches of the “Shiny Jeweled Tree” in the sarcophagus cover of the Maya ruler Pakal.
 - At Yaxchilán, it is a supernatural two-headed centipede that serves as a channel for the visions of Lady Xook. Her visions, born of smoke and loss of blood, seem to encourage the Yaxchilán ruler to go to war.
 - In the colossal image of Coatlicue, the snakes that replace her severed head and arms are meant to represent the flow of blood.

- The Aztec Calendar Stone is also encircled by two cosmic fire serpents who spew deity-warriors' heads from their jaws.
- Serpents proved to be flexible and useful symbols. They have a host of positive and negative associations—and potent symbolic meanings. They can be used to imply immortality or regeneration or quite the opposite—death. They are sometimes connected with water and fertility of the earth and, at other times, with the sky.
- Chinese bronze vessels in the shape of animals also recall this emphasis on the natural and spirit world. These vessels demonstrate wonder and admiration for particular creatures, with little or no emphasis on human representations.
 - In ancient China, these bronze vessels were put in tombs to feed the dead ancestors and to assist in communication with the spirit world.
 - In modern China, the acclaimed artist Ai Weiwei harked back to ancient forms in his enormous installation of bronze animal heads representing the zodiac.

The Theme of Fertility

- The Uruk Vase (c. 3100 B.C.) marks the beginning of a new phase in artistic expression and continuing concerns with fertility. In Mesopotamia at the time, animals had been domesticated and urbanism had begun. Humans controlled the environment to a much greater extent but not completely. People still acknowledged their dependence on the power of nature by presenting gifts to the goddess of abundance and fertility, Inana.
- Similarly, the “Ram Caught in a Thicket” is a symbolic image of fertility, with the male and female principles represented by the goat and the rosette tree of Inana. We see the same rosette symbol millennia later at the Ishtar Gate, which celebrates the goddess of love, fertility, and war.

- The “Queen of the Night,” a cult statue from Old Babylonian times, may be Ishtar herself. This naked and commanding goddess is not completely human: She has wings and talons and seems to represent forces of the night, as well as fertility.
- Inana’s/Ishtar’s rightful descendant in the Western tradition is Aphrodite.
 - The sculpture at Knidos is the first large-scale nude Greek goddess, yet that nudity connects her more closely with her Near Eastern forebears and even the fertility figures of the Neolithic.
 - This Aphrodite, as well as other versions, has been reinterpreted in a secular way. Thus we have modern works, such as Jim Dine’s, that draw heavily on Classical associations, in addition to the somewhat biological thrill of seeing the image of a beautiful nude woman.
- Nude females who relate to fertility and love appear in some shape or form in most cultures, including the *yakshis*, or tree spirits, at the stupa at Sanchi. The Indian tradition celebrated these ripe and voluptuous nature spirits.
- In Mesoamerica, we see a different interpretation of the female earth mother or reproductive deity: the colossal statue of Coatlicue, who embodies the frightening powers of birth and death. The combination of the soft, naked flesh of her chest with the necklace of a skull and severed hands is a horrifying example of blended features.

Death and Immortality

- The results of the Egyptian obsession with securing immortality are truly stupendous. The tomb of Tutankhamun and its famous gold mask combine both the material most associated with immortal life—gold—with accomplished metalworking and artistry. It was only one component in the many preparations for death.
 - The efforts to fill the tomb with all the necessary accoutrements of life in the next world required the production of masses of artworks, finely crafted tomb furniture, statues, and more. We

saw this in the exquisite artistry of the tomb of Nefertari, which is breathtakingly painted with images of her complex journey to the afterlife.

- The pressure of preparing a work for eternity must have been a powerful incentive, demanding no less than perfection. That frame of mind extended to the mummification and exacting treatment of the human body as the vessel in the hereafter.
- Andean cultures valued the body or mummy of the ruler and continued to treat it as human after death. Elite Peruvian people were tied into a fetal position as mummies and wrapped with layers of sumptuous textiles.
- In an allied but wholly different approach to artworks associated with death, Chinese elites used the medium of bronze vessels to serve their ancestors food and drink, prolonging life after death.
- Other approaches to death in our course have been less joyful. In the Greek tradition, the Sarpedon vase, despite the mythological derivation of its scene, gives us a poignant depiction of loss; we can't help but feel the senseless of the hero's death.
- Similarly, the terror and physical pain of the Laocoön group is one of the high points of feeling in the Classical world. As Laocoön fights against the tightening coils of a constricting python, the look of restrained pain and horror on his face is more than palpable, and the motion here contrasts strongly with the immobility of funerary art from Egypt.
- Far more removed from emotions, bodies, and any reminder of the pain of death, we have actual funerary monuments of Buddha: the stupas at Sanchi and Borobudur. These examples of architecture adorned with art require the movement and participation of the viewer to allow for contemplation of the artworks and meaningful learning.

Rulership and Dominance

- As we've seen, some of our greatest works of art owe their existence to the desires of rulers. Those rulers sought to glorify themselves, legitimate their rule, and sometimes even deify themselves in a bid for both recognition and immortality. Usually, these efforts involved showing a ruler who was larger than life, skilled at conquest, and physically and intellectually superior to others.
- The first example of such heroics shows up in the Palette of Narmer. The king is depicted as larger than other men and wears the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt, setting the stage for generations of Egyptian kings to claim to unite the two lands and vanquish chaos.
- The Standard of Ur is a wonderful Mesopotamian example of unfurling narrative in a colorful mosaic inlay of semiprecious stones. This object depicts a ruler's victory in war and demonstrates his centrality in providing sustenance for his people, which became a common theme for rulers in many cultures.
- On the Stela of Naram-Sin, we see one of the world's first detailed scenes of a specific military campaign on a monument that glorifies and even deifies the ruler. This type of aggrandizement by rulers is one of the major subjects and themes of the art of Mesopotamia and quite a few other ancient kingdoms. We see it most grandly expressed in the later reliefs of the Assyrian Empire.
- Other scenes of symbolism or battle that glorify the ruler include the reliefs at Persepolis. They draw on Egyptian and Mesopotamian examples to demonstrate the enemies underfoot and the might of the Achaemenid emperor. Of course, the sheer size and majesty of the buildings at Persepolis was also a statement about the might of the emperor.
- In Rome, the most unusual monument to a ruler must be the Column of Trajan, which nevertheless follows the Assyrian example of showing foreign campaigns by packing as many as possible into a spiraling marble frieze!

- We also see messages about rulership and empire in Mesoamerica. The most distinctive, earliest, and impressive colossal ruler portraits are the heads of the Olmec rulers. Not only are they astoundingly carved and sized, but they manage to convey the individuality, brute strength, and careworn aspect of the rulers.

Lessons from the Course

- The themes we have seen in ancient art bind humans in almost all civilizations and are reflected in art across time.
- In the end, the endless variation of imagination and expression in art is one of the truly astonishing aspects of human culture. Artistic expression is everywhere.
- Studying both ancient and contemporary artworks can help us all to begin finding answers to Gauguin's provocative and challenging questions: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Suggested Reading

Boardman, *The World of Ancient Art*.

Pasztor, *Thinking with Things*.

Scarre, ed., *The Seventy Wonders of the Ancient World*.

Siliotti, ed., *The Hidden Treasures of Antiquity*.

Questions to Consider

1. What objects seen in our course made the greatest impact on you?
2. From which artworks did you learn the most?

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———. *Treasures of the Incas*. London: Duncan Baird, 2012. A gorgeous book with great images of Andean art. The accompanying text is a well-written and engaging overview of pre-Columbian Andean cultures before the Inca.

Stone-Miller, Rebecca. *Art of the Andes*. 3rd ed. London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012. Best overview to read as an introduction to Andean art and culture.